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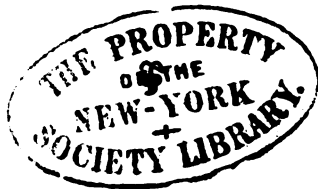
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THE CONFESSION OF STEPHEN WHAPSHARE

BY

EMMA BROOKE

Author of "A Superfluous Woman," "Transition"
and "Life the Accuser"

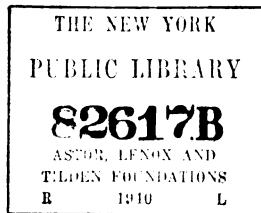


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THE CONFESSION
OF
STEPHEN WHAPSHARE.

THE MANUSCRIPT OF STEPHEN WHAPSHARE
FOUND AFTER HIS DEATH.

CHAPTER I.

BECAUSE by the light of uncommon
griefs the meaning of common sorrows
may become plainer, I, Stephen Whapshare,
unfold the story of my unmatched experience
for the comfort of my brothers, the sad in
heart and the failures amongst men.

I was the son of a fisher of Devon, and the
first things my hands touched in labour were

1. 7. 20

the nets my father used in sea-fishing. From my early childhood I spent many hours in a wide loft over some workshops, to which I ascended by an outside ladder. Here my father taught me the art of making and mending nets, this being the employment by which he added to his earnings in times unseasonable for sea-fishing.

In the loft were three square-shaped windows, and through these peep-holes, as I moved about in the dim place, netting and mending, I could see pictures of sea and sky and light. It was a wonderful and dazzling thing I looked on, ever on the quietest days having a ripple of change before me, and even when the sea-mists came up, receiving an impression of blank immaterial whiteness. This whiteness or splendour of the day is set in memory amidst the cozy redness of my evenings, when, returning to my parents' cottage, I sat in my nook by the fire, and watched the comfortable glow, and felt my mother's love about me, and the awe and pride of my fath-

er's presence. And in these evenings I received the impress of simple and direct piety, listening to my father's voice night by night reading from the Bible and weaving the stories of Scripture and the grand English in which they were told, inseparably into my conception of the reality of life.

In my childhood I was also often with my father in his boat, and remained with him by night as well as by day ; and thus I learned at first hand something of the loneliness and danger of the sea, and the wonder of the sea-fishing—the empty nets thrown out, the heavy nets drawn in, full of strange and palpitating shapes, which affected my child's heart with fantastic suggestion, opening out to it the fringe of an unknown world that had "business in the great waters."

It was amidst things of this kind that was formed within me the trend of thought through which my life was wrecked and saved at last.

I sat usually in the prow of the boat, watching rather than helping, seeing some cruel

things done, but also kindness, amongst men ; and my imagination was affected to a secret sympathy with the helpless things drawn from their mysterious happiness beneath the waves, showing themselves to us in agonised glimpses, and looking at our world with empty eyes that not so much as understood what misadventure had brought them into it. So I sat close with my thoughts, the wash of the sea in my ears, the creaking of the ropes, and straining and flapping of sails, and sometimes the lashing of storm.

One night I remember in particular. It was a still night. The waves lapped lazily, and the boat rose and fell with a gentle movement, and the men were quiet. It was so calm, and I myself so shared in the calm, that the things around me were visionary, and came and went as dreams, amidst which my heart lay small and still. News of a mackerel shoal had reached us in the afternoon, and my father had put out to meet the fish.

We now lay anchored not far from shore,

with the nets spread. But the evening went by, and still the shining stream did not pass us, and we remained where we were, waiting far into the night. Between the ropes I saw the evening star. Sometimes I slumbered, but when I woke it was there, sliding slowly downwards with its four silver rays ; and once, opening my eyes between sleep and waking, I saw my father stooping down in the boat with a lantern in his hand. The light struck his face, and I caught it in profile as I had often seen it at home, the glow of the fire upon it, quiet, rugged, and simple as an old picture. And such was the force of association that, seeing it so, I seemed to myself at home, with the pressure of my mother's arm about me ; and, though no word was uttered now, my father's voice was loud and solemn in my ears :

“ I will make you to become fishers of men ! ”
it said, for that was the text which had struck my fancy at our last worship.

My father shut down the lantern, and I

could not see his face any more. The words ran on in my mind.

Then I think I slept. When I awaked it was dawn, and they had pulled in the nets. They were empty, save for a few odd fish, whose sides jumped with the fear and distress they were in. The faces of the men, grim and callous, bent over this shaking, ebbing life, and I remarked that those creatures for which the fisher has no use they wantonly killed; but the young of the desirable sort they threw back into the sea. And when that happened, my child's heart drew a breath of relief, for I was ever on the side of the fish whose beautiful sport I often caught sight of amidst the sea-weed through the clear blue waves; and the promise of the text was further perplexing and heightening my sympathy by the analogy which I could not understand. By and bye I gathered that through some exceptional ill-chance the mackerel shoal had turned aside, and the men had missed it. They swore roughly over

their wasted labour, and my father startled me by unaccustomed harshness.

“Get up, lazy-bones!” cried he gruffly. “We want no sluggards on this boat!” and he pushed me with his foot.

The striking of this rough reality upon my visionary state shook out of me odd speech, and, opening my eyes wide on my father’s face—so changed from its aspect of the night before—I uttered the words with which my mind was charged :

“I will make you to become fishers of men !” I exclaimed.

At that my father’s jaw fell, and a curious silence sank on the boat, for there was none in it who could not trace the words to Sacred Writ ; and in between the silence the waves beat gently. Grey morn was all about us now, and I saw with wonder that the men looked with stealthy glances at one another, and that my father stared at the bottom of the boat. Peter Labrum, a lad of nineteen, but one who was already the leader if drink and

swearing were in question, looked across his shoulder at me as he stooped over the boat's edge to gather in the last links of the empty nets, and his face wore a silly smile, and one that was partly malicious. All this I noted without understanding either what I had said or what I had done. My father sat down and cut me a piece of bread, and handed it to me. I took it, but had no mind to eat, being as greatly disturbed by the sudden hush as I had been by the rough speech.

"Shall we set he ashore?" asked Peter, grinning.

"Steve," said my father, "shall we set 'ee ashore?"

But I shook my head.

"We're going further out for big fish. They mackerel have failed. Will 'ee come?"

And I nodded.

"Let be," said my father; "let en come."

So we sailed further, and the haul of fish was good, but night overtook us, and, the boat being loaded, a storm caught us. I lay


huddled up in the bottom, faint and sick with the movement, and when the morning dawned again, I saw for the first time the faces of grown men changed by the fear of death, and grappling with the fate that pressed them. I saw the faces momentarily through sheets and washes of rain and spray; but the storm tore their voices from my ears. Sometimes the faces flashed out of the wet mists below me, sometimes above me. I myself was lashed fast by a rope, and as I lay sick, and cramped, and cold, suddenly I saw my father's face hanging over me, washed by storm, and the eyes small and hard with fear.

“Steve! Pray! Pray hard!” he shouted.

And the next moment, so tossed were we, I looked down on that which had just leaned above me. Then, heeding my father's command, I, for the first time in my life, lifted myself above my baby prayers, and cried to a felt but invisible Power, undoubting that we lay, as it were, in the hollow of a Great Hand, which poured us and our boat from one instant

of peril into another, but which could in a moment snatch us back from our fate to a place of safety.

A day or two afterwards, when we were back at home, and the fish had been sold, and the event was falling gently into the dream-like amongst the old accustomed things, I sat in my corner on my small wooden stool with my book. I had not gone in the boat again, for the fishing was stopped for a time, the sea being rough and angry, while a great wind whirled rain-clouds over the shore, mingled with sand and small pebbles. Neither had I gone out to mend nets in the loft. And as I sat that evening and read, I heard my name gently spoken. Already, as I say, the memory of the storm was fading, yet it was not forgotten, and when I heard my name so spoken, and saw my parents standing before me with a notable look in their eyes—as though an angel of God had passed between the doors of the house, and left some fragment of His light behind—I thought of it again.



“Steve,” said my father, “will you grow up to be a fisher of men?”

And he spread his rough hands out over me as though in consecration. I looked at my mother, being awed beyond my wont; and in my imagination I saw nothing but a great grey chalky stretch of sea and sky, and a net suspended between, full of palpitating and strange shapes.

“And learn to be a great scholar,” said my mother quickly, seeing the pallor which crept into my face.

At which I smiled.

“Aye, mother, that will I,” said I.

Then I got up from my stool; and, being persons of few words, my parents said no more, but looked at each other, and let me pass between them. I went to the house door and shut it behind me. And there I stood, watching the wash of the rain over a wind-tossed sky, and hearing the ceaseless roar of the breakers, and the scream of the pebbles on the shore. I knew that it was settled I

was to go no more in the boat, but must be diligent with my books to some mysterious end. My breast swelled, and my heart beat fast within it.

The road on which our cottage stood had an upward lift, and curled along the cliff, dotted with houses, then it passed into the main street of a small village, and out again into the bare cliff beyond. To-day it was so wet that it shone in a pale glitter of mud and water, while the gutter of the cottage made a ceaseless trickle of flowing drops close to my ears. And over the rise, in the midst of the rush and the wind, came the figure of a man, rolling a trifle in his walk, and bending his head in the storm. I watched him idly, and on and on he came, until I saw him to be young Peter Labrum, leaving one public-house behind him, and walking a mile or so through the wet to find another at the end. Seeing me he lurched towards me, and, presuming on my boyhood, took me most unmannerly by the ear. And this my loathing of the smell

of beer and my new-found dignity made me resent.

“Let me a-be, Pete!” cried I.

“O-ho, Steve!” cried he, offended; “saved from drowning, are ’ee? Saved from drowning, and kept safe for a hanging!”

At this I, exceedingly angered, gave him a push, and wrenched myself free; but he, being three-parts drunk already, lurched up against the side of the house, and fell under the gutter. Whereat, seeing the big man fallen at a child’s touch, and the water flowing over him, I became greatly disturbed in my imagination, and thinking of the net suspended between sea and sky, and of the palpitating shapes within, burst into tears.

“I did n’t mean it, Pete!” cried I.

At this, angry at the fall, and astonished at my tears, he came at me with a clenched fist, but I ran into the porch to avoid him; he then leaned against the side and contented himself with words.

“Gallow’s-bird!” cried he, looking at me

with a red, drunken face of malice, his fish cap pushed to the back of his head ; “ I meet ’ee and be even with ’ee yet, if I mu hang with ’ee for it ! ”





CHAPTER II.

THAT was the last meeting between Pete and myself in our native village. I afterwards heard that his drunkenness was a celebration of a rise in life in his own method. His handsome face, and the facility with which he followed evil counsels, had attracted the attention of a flashily dressed ne'er-do-weel, who was amusing himself in the neighbourhood, and who needed a companion and tool to help him on his way to destruction. This man took Pete into his service, and very shortly we heard that the fisher-lad had followed his master to London. And therein having plunged, we heard of him no more.

In the meantime, I set to my books with a will, yet tempered my studies with some

practice in athletics, so that in me might be better fashioned a complete man. My parents were by persuasion Wesleyan Methodists, but in our village was no too jealous demarcation between the forms of religion, so that the clergyman made it his business to advise as to my education.

I lived amidst these things with the patient adaptability of a child to the will of his elders, understanding little of the matter, but conscious of a mysterious width of destiny to which the means were present application. Those about me passed me on to my future with officious hands ; I had a sesame that opened every door. From the clergyman's interest I proceeded to that of the great people of the neighbourhood, who, finding in my gifts a distinction indigenous to their own district, made it their business to bring me forward. Thus, by the time I was two or three and twenty, I had left the sphere to which I was born, and had been so far received in the houses of the richer folk as to have acquired

something of manners and courtesy, and of the ease of gracious behaviour.

While staying at one of these houses, into which I ever seemed to myself to have arrived by some magic of fate, I was introduced to a gentleman who offered me the post of secretary. Mr. Ashley, my future employer, was of northern extraction, and belonged to a firm of successful railway operators. In him the inherited desire to be rich had changed to a desire for social distinction. Not yet in Parliament, he hoped, in the future, to be called upon to stand for his native town of Millbottom, at present represented by Mr. Craven, a local master and mill-owner. Mr. Ashley's ambition, and the cool game with the world which he played for it, were the fundamental facts of his character. He would have been a tolerable fellow to deal with had he presented himself barely as the man he was, for he had resource, and a temper under management, and considerable tact. But these good parts were obscured by pretensions to something he

■

named "the higher life." I never knew Mr. Ashley to risk good opinion by a rash correction of the current pattern of virtue ; but by an assiduous performance of religious and philanthropic acts, he fingered the susceptibilities of his fellows, plucked honour from the shelf, and economically repaid expenditure by reputation.

It is probable that my parents had, in their first idea for me, the calling of the Wesleyan ministry ; but, deceived by the rumour of Mr. Ashley's good deeds, and further persuaded by some persons of the neighbourhood, they exchanged this for the offered secretaryship. It may be that, confused by a similarity in broadcloth, they took it but as a variation. I had no knowledge either way, but longed to taste of that apple of Sodom, the world. Therefore I put on gladly the habit of a class to which I did not belong, left the fisher village and my early austerities behind, and passed into the service of as plausible a rascal as ever posed for a guide to heaven.

As with Pete, so with myself ; London

was the first destination, and there I had not been long before I made my discoveries, and began to bite of the apple, and to find it in the taste both good and evil. From some things I met with I shrank sensitively, and that not so much because they were broadly bad as because they were callously accepted. In the face of the general suave compromise—each man fearing to offend his neighbour by his principles, each man threading his way between his sense of absolute right and so much mitigation of it as would least threaten his own security—I began to long for those broad sins of my own people wherein a man erred or did not err; the swearing, drinking, and rough passions with which, in familiar innocence, I was as much acquainted as with the storms of the sea. I longed, I say, for an obvious pursuit of destruction in place of this close sailing about infernal shores, from which men perilously escaped by narrow evasions, and then, in triumphant ingenuity, explained the cleanness of their hands.

But chiefly I was not unmindful of that base of wretchedness on which this society, thus complex in its adjustments between vice and virtue, stood.

The house where my employer lived was in Westminster, in the vicinity of the Houses of Parliament, in the very heart of thinking, scheming London. One day, having been sent to a part of London where the misery flowed, not through contrasting channels of splendour and beauty as at Westminster, but in the narrow streets where it is bred, I found myself in so great a passion of pity and ruth, so great an indignation, that I could not come into the house, but, turning aside, walked through Whitehall to Trafalgar Square, and up to the terrace of the National Gallery, where I stood looking down at the scene beneath me. And in the strength of my emotion, and the simplicity of my religious faith (as yet unaltered from my parents' instruction), I lifted my aspiration upwards, praying that I might not traffic with philanthropy for my own ad-

vantage, but, becoming the servant and helper of these despoiled children of earth, be in myself Christ's disciple to them, and forsaking "the little competitions, factions, and debates of mankind," with place and office, deliberately in my own life return to the simple austerity of that teaching which He followed Himself and laid on others.

It was my spiritual majority I reached in that hour, shaping definitely within my mind the aim worth my pursuit in life. And the prayer thus loosened from my heart went up and stood in ignorant courage before God ; and He laid His hand on it and took it back to Himself, remembering it.

I returned to my employer's house, and mounting the stairs, entered the drawing-room. The couple were at tea-drinking, and there were no guests. Mr. Ashley stood on the hearth, his back to the fire—for it was March—and Mrs. Ashley sat at the tea-table near.

Mr. Ashley was stout, and had a double chin, presided over by a hard, common-place eye.

His habit of speech was in circumlocution. Mrs. Ashley was a coldly handsome woman, who made a figure at bazaars ; I presume that she knew how to dress, for she ever lent me the impression of costliness and of grave transactions in shops. In manner, she was apt to over-emphasise her husband's. But her leading personal trait was a narrow, insolent pride, which marked and never forgave an injury or a kindness.

" Things are stirring a little, Whapshare ! " cried Mr. Ashley as I entered.

" My husband," said Mrs. Ashley from behind the tea-cups, " has received a compliment—one as great as it is unexpected."

Whereupon I cast about amongst my later memories to recall what favour of fortune Mr. Ashley had been most assiduously scheming for.

" Is it the borough of Millbottom ? " asked I, with light bursting over my mind.

Mrs. Ashley handed me a cup with a murmur of surprise at my skilful guessing.

"You read in the papers of the sudden death of Mr. Craven, member for Millbottom, I presume?" suggested Mr. Ashley, giving me my cue for the game of feigning which he played.

"Ah!" said I, speaking to my light, "there will be a bye-election."

"Just so. Well, they've telegraphed to me to stand."

"It will be an opportunity for my husband in the service of his country—should he feel it right to accept."

"I think I may accept."

"Had you not better telegraph at once?" cried I, deceived for the moment.

"You are in a hurry!" and Mr. Ashley smiled over his double chin to the carpet. "You think I should stand?"

I nodded, and stirred my tea in silence, being convinced that he had already telegraphed in the affirmative, and that immediately upon receiving the message. I was not skilful in feigning response. I marvelled at this worry-

ing of a straightforward occurrence by little unnecessary lies.

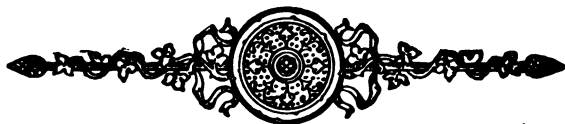
But there are persons whose intellectual capacity leads them to feel safer amidst lies than truth, and who conceive that every event is adorned by a setting of falsity. Mr. Ashley, seeing that I was awkward at falling in with the game, somewhat impatiently invited me to be ready to start with him to Millbottom the next day, to which I consented, not without a sense of pleasure, for, in my new-found clearness of aim, each day was my opportunity, and every place my occasion, and each change a lift onwards over my own road.

But how could I dream of the pit into which I should fall straight from the radiant hour? What had I done to be so punished? What was my sin that my humiliation should be bitter? and that He should take me and grind me to atoms in the mills of His experience?

For even now as I sat in the room of my employer, with the sun on my hair, and gifts of food and drink before me, and the sense of

choice, and will, and strength within, He drew my prayer, my consecration, back to Him, laying His hand on it, and answering it. And He whispered to His messengers : " Go blind him ! " And to the forces of Nature He whispered : " Take his will prisoner ! " And to the forces that are spiritual He whispered : " Lie in wait for him in the way ! " And Hell itself He commanded : " Loosen your battalions upon him, and beleaguer him round ! "

Thus to the knowledge and experience hidden in the overshadowing of His wings of night, He, the Spirit, stooped down, laying His lips against the ears of their silence and speaking.





CHAPTER III.

MILLBOTTOM was a large manufacturing town on the border between two counties, and the house of my employer stood above a neighbouring village which lay in a valley of romantic beauty, spreading out the greystone prose of a few factories and many cottages amidst the poetry of as hill-dappled and fair-coloured a landscape as I have seen. Its people were racy of the soil, wholesome and independent. Amongst them I speedily found myself more at home than I had been since leaving my native district ; here I could fall into place within the mean and benign average of human nature, and so lose some of that feeling of isolation to which I had been subject amidst the strained complexity of London.

To live in the house of my employer was not a part of my arrangement with him, so I sought my lodging elsewhere, having a choice that way, and being glad to be sometimes free from the atmosphere which kept me inwardly protesting through half the hours of the day. I heard of lodgings in one of those little "halls," which, of the size of a very large and roomy cottage but no more, mark the survival of yeomen families in the north.

The name of the owner of this little hall was Maver, and the hall itself was called Maver Hall—for the name of the yeomen and their land is usually one. Maver Hall—the small house and the small garden—was surrounded by a stone wall, in which was a painted gate. As I pushed this back, the house door opposite opened, and a woman of angular figure, with a long, interminable waist, and of plain features, and a singular taciturnity of manner, stood on the threshold expectant of my business.

"Is this house Mr. Maver's?" asked I, uncovering my head.

The woman frowned.

"Aye, John Maver's," said she. "Clap thee hat on, young man ! We're plain folk."

I obeyed involuntarily.

"I was told I might get rooms here."

"If thou'rt honest and civil."

"I trust I am both." And I smiled, relishing this rough directness of address.

"Time will show. But come in and welcome," said she, without mitigation of her dry, inexpectant bearing.

It appeared there were two rooms ; one a bare, cleanly place, built over a wood-shed, and pervaded by a pleasant country odour of sweet herbs, which I might call my bedroom. For my sitting-room I was given the "parlour," which contained more furniture than was to my liking. Some of it was old and good ; but there was a less pleasing admixture, and especially many strange compositions in coloured wool, serving either as mats or antimacassars.

The real pride of the house was the kitchen, a place of age, cleanliness, and comfort. After

viewing the two rooms offered me, I lingered at the open door with a twinge of heartache, so much did its honest integrity of atmosphere bring back the taste of my still humbler home in the south. My pause was noted by the woman, whose taciturn face changed a little, while her eye travelled over my coat. This was, indeed, of London make, I being as much of a dandy as my salary would allow ; but she offered me no invitation, and I was passing on, when a big masculine voice from the interior called to me :

“Come in, sir, come in ! and welcome. Mary, lass, why dost keep the gentleman standing ?”

I found myself in the presence of a burly-looking man, whose gravity of expression was tempered by a lively pair of grey eyes ; the rest of his features having as sturdy a mould as I have seen in a north countryman. He wore the dress of a master stone-mason ; the dust of labour lay upon his clothes and hair and beard. He stood under the great black

beam of his kitchen, and his eyes rested on me with an expression something between pride and invitation. On a rocking-chair by the fire sat a woman, clasping a sleeping child of about two years in her arms, and slowly rocking to and fro.

"You are Mr. Maver?" I asked.

"John Maver at your service, sir, stonemason and class-leader."

With him I settled the terms for my rooms, Mary standing by the while. I remarked a great similarity in feature between the two; but the type was more suitable to the masculine face than the feminine, and there was, besides, in the brother the adornment of hair to soften asperities. John was better looking for a man than Mary for a woman. Would that it had not been so! For to the ensnarement of beauty must be added the deception of its lack when the circumstances that shape the weal and woe of a man's life are summed up.

The moment my bargain with John was settled, Mary broke in on the conversation.

"Young man," said she, "it would be a saving in labour"—here her eyes again travelled over my coat—"if you could make shift to take meals with us in the kitchen."

"Mary! *For shame!*" ejaculated the woman by the fireside, stopping her rockers, so that the child whimpered.

"Mary is right," cried I; "there is nothing I should like better."

"Well!" said John, reaching a cap from a nail on the beam, and turning it round his hand uneasily before he put it on, "settle it amongst yo'sels. *I don't interfere.*"

My employer's residence, Tadley House, stood on a slight ascent, and was pleasantly surrounded by fifteen acres of green land and gardens. The management of his country place was stately, more so than the style he affected in London; and when I returned to him that same evening, I was embarrassed by the obsequious manner of a footman, whom I knew to be of my own rank in life, but who was removed from me by the accident of the

coat I wore and the culture I had acquired. He, innocent guide to a great disaster, piloted me through the outer and inner halls, and opened the door to a large drawing-room of irregular shape. I thought it for the moment empty, and, having gone a few steps, paused to admire the beauty of the place I stood in, and to soothe myself with the sense of things well-ordered and choice, and with the flow of garden greenness and solitude outside. The windows were wide and full-length, and ran along one side of the room. They had damask curtains of a golden tint, and soft white muslin curtains as well, and flowing in between them was the light of an evening, softly brilliant, but not red; and as I stood turning my eyes hither and thither, and gradually concentrating them on this resplendency of the atmosphere, I became aware of a breathing movement amidst the curtains, and then, disentangling itself from the folds, of the figure of a woman, who came towards me with an outstretched hand. She herself was clad in a

robe of soft and silky whiteness, and the light on her hair made it gold ; so that it seemed to my startled fancy as though part of the light itself had taken sudden and exquisite shape—that she was born as a wraith from the whiteness and the sheen and the rays of my own eyes, and was coming to me as to her master, with that faint acknowledgment of her frail and outstretched hand.

All the world was dream-like with youth and inexperience at that time. But I had not thought of the woman in it that was for me. If snares had been laid for me in London I had not known or had ignored them. Life was too full, too strange, too new, too vividly pictorial for me, a peasant lad, to have so far found room for its highest mystery and attraction. But now out of that glamour of a spring evening it came to me, the great experience—cold, glittering, white, still—a sword pointed at me, a shining danger, a most gentle damnation.



CHAPTER IV.

I HAD no foreboding. But the ominous thing was that this first introduction of two, whose meeting fates were to lead to an issue so monstrous, was made in complete silence. No sooner had I found the frail hand within mine than the door opened again, and Mrs. Ashley appeared. The vision—for my senses so far had hardly accepted her as a woman—escaped from the room, leaving me in a tingle of surmise, suspense, and mortification, with no clearer feeling than an unconquerable reluctance to inquire her name and standing from Mrs. Ashley, whose silken skirts were sweeping romance away with them as she advanced towards the fire. Upon that followed the foot of my employer; and he called me to work in the library.

The evening was passed in electioneering preparation, during which I watched in vain for a re-appearance of the lady of light, but treasured in my palm the flake-like touch I had felt.

The business of the first evening consisted in the reception by Mr. Ashley of various representative men of the district; I sat ready to his command, and marvelled with how many faces and how wide a hospitality a wily man can entertain a variety of conflicting views.

Millbottom had a large sectarian population, chiefly Wesleyan, and here the political faith was opposed to Conservatism. A leading person amongst them was one Mr. Snape, a Methodist mill-owner, whose timid politics alternated between the very subtle distinctions of naming himself now a Conservative-Liberal, and then a Liberal-Conservative. Close on the heels of the Conservative and influential vicar, whom Mr. Ashley had endeavoured to win from the basis of "The man and not the

principle," came this Mr. Snape, whom it was now the business of my employer to attach to the Conservative-Liberal phase. He was a curious little man, with a glass eye and a broken nose, disfigurements resulting from a fall in youth. After some hesitating preliminary affairs, during which the visitor became confused and overheated, I was surprised to hear Mr. Ashley direct the conversation in a Scriptural direction, by pointing a surmise as to the meaning of "The Battle of Armageddon." Having made this digression from more pressing topics, he sat with his legs crossed, and his blunt thumbs and finger-tips laid one against the other, and listened with every evidence of interest, while the little mill-owner strove ineffectually to express himself in words, and made up for the failure by the shining of his glass eye, and the glowing colour of his face. I gathered, after a time, that, in Mr. Snape's opinion, the present minister of the district Wesleyan Chapel had an unusual talent in the interpretation of

prophecy, and that he thrilled his congregation by translating the Beast of Revelations into the terms of more than one living, or lately living, personality.

“I assure you, sir, he makes us feel what times we live in. I think I may take it upon me to say that his gift is not surpassed even by Dr. Comyn. You know Dr. Comyn’s books, Mr. Ashley?”

Whereupon Mr. Ashley spoke generally on their value ; from which I gathered that he had but bare acquaintance even with the titles of these volumes, while the other assumed them to be my employer’s favourite reading.

Mr. Snape, who was one whose feeling of diversion could be best stirred by the apprehension of a Judgment Day hanging imminent above him, now inquired after that particular work of Dr. Comyn’s, entitled *The Scarlet Woman, and her Connection with the Pyramids* ; he had promised himself, it appeared, to enliven a Sunday afternoon by its perusal, but so far had failed to procure the book.

"It shall be sent down to you, Mr. Snape," said Mr. Ashley, drawing out his note-book, and making an entry with the gold pencil that dangled from his watch-chain.

After this, the arrangement of a Wesleyan political tea-party in the undenominational school-room, at Mr. Snape's expense, was easy. A mixed programme of speeches, prayer, and music, was planned, Mr. Snape hesitatingly suggesting that he himself should give the work-people a song entitled "Violets, Sweet Violets," as a preliminary to Mr. Ashley's speech, while the Wesleyan minister should conclude by prayer.

To these miscellaneous political innovations Mr. Ashley was obliged to consent with enforced cheerfulness, and Mr. Snape having left the house in elation, I was required to despatch a groom post-haste to the neighbouring town of Millbottom to order *The Scarlet Woman*, and the other works of Dr. Comyn, for immediate delivery at Tadley House.

It was when the evening of work was over that I encountered my lady of the light again.

As I entered the hall, which was furnished in all parts as a room, I saw her standing by a table, upon which was placed a white camellia shrub in full bloom. Her aspect was down-cast, and I noted the chiselled severity of her features and the clear parting of her plentiful chestnut hair, which was smoothed down on either side a somewhat low brow with classical simplicity. Her eyebrows were of a darker colour, and were neatly defined, but lacked character, perhaps, and her lashes were ordinary. Her colouring was of a delicate china bloom, of which the proximity of the camellia enhanced the fresh charm ; and she was young, at the most having but passed her twenty-third year. But I think the chief attraction of the face lay with me in its linear severity, in the rather precise mouth and defined thin chin, and in the impression of coldness and symmetry and decorum. After the unmoulded breadth of my employer's features and figure

—a looseness of structure which seemed ever on the point of flowing beyond the cast—this reserved outline, even though it attained no high degree of beauty, fetched from me a breath of admiration. I seemed to have passed from the stews to a clear air, and when, upon raising her eyes, I saw in them the light both of gentleness and of spirituality, it seemed to me that a star had come out on a night of snows. The quick closing of the lids over them, and the blush of sensitive modesty under my bold gaze, gave what was necessary to a man's full undoing.

Our admirations are but our moods, and some are more prolonged than others. He who succeeds best in the choice of a friend unconsciously adjusts his selection to the mood which habitually comes uppermost ; and he is happy in that he leaves fewer corners of his nature than others do where mourning and singing go on alone. None has sufficient knowledge of himself and others to match the whole or to choose an eternal, a lasting com-

panion. Permanency is not in the compact, for all character-reading is but surmise, sometimes just and sometimes illusory. Our impression of another is at best a light of many-coloured fancy thrown there from our own imagination. Even a rascal is painted blacker than he is.

I knew not how to address this creature, whose exquisite appearance was so instantaneously furnished from the repertory of my fancy; but, remembering the manner of her first salutation, I, in my turn, advanced with outstretched hand, and took hers into it.

"To-morrow," I murmured, looking down into her face.

It seemed the single word by which I might convey the sense of an onward-streaming future that widened out from under the gentle meeting of our hands. She did not speak, but the awaiting thought in her eyes was as clear as a child's, and I turned satisfied away.

Upon my return to Maver Hall, I found

only Mary in the kitchen. My hours were later than the family rule, and the rest were in bed. Mary was by the fire preparing something for my refreshment, which I declined.

The presence and appearance of Mary Maver had a soothing and sobering effect upon me. I tumbled back to my class in her presence, and threw off a sense of unreality of which I had scarcely been aware; and I vaguely and indefinitely wished that I could remain just where I was. As to the goodness of her nature, that I read in her hands and their movements. Already work-coarsened, I caught in them the habit of kindly service. Her face might be plain and taciturn; but the hands spoke for her. Also she was young. There was youth in her hair, and colour and roundness in her cheek. The future lay before her as before me.

"Sit down, Mary, won't you?" said I.

"As you will, lad," and she seated herself.

"I should like to talk to you a little," said I.

"I can listen," said she.

"Why did you wish me to have meals in the kitchen?"

"That's plain. To save labour."

"Are you so very busy?"

"It keeps one going to fight dirt and fill folkses' hunger."

"But would you have asked such a thing of *any* gentleman?"

She rubbed one hand slowly over the other.

"Maybe not. You're no gentleman, lad. You're honest flesh and blood like ourselves."

"That's so, Mary. My father was a fisher of Devon."

"Devon's a long way from us."

"And yet, sitting here with you, I feel as though I were back in it."

"It's the kitchen and my working ways may hap."

"I think that may be so. The sea washed below our house in Devon, Mary. There are often storms, and sometimes wrecks. The fisher-folk live a hard life. I myself came near

drowning once—I and my good old father, and a boatful of men.”

“There’s worse things than drowning, lad. Don’t you forget Devon and your fisher father!”

“Why should you say that?”

“You’re on the way to it—*seemingly*,” and her eyes travelled over my dress.

“I have to wear this kind of coat. I have to move amongst people of a different class from ours. You see, I’m a secretary—Mr. Ashley’s secretary.”

“*Ashley’s* secretary, are you?”

Her tongue rejected the name with a fine and subtle scorn.

“Don’t you think well of Mr. Ashley?”

“I think nought of Ashley and nought of Tadley House. Ashleys are neither squires born and bred, nor jannock masters. Ashley got what they’re gotten by railways and roguing. It will be no harm to you to sit and break bread with honest folk between whiles.”

"Mr. Ashley is standing for Parliament," said I.

"Belike. They send a pack of rogues there, don't they?"

"There's a fair sprinkling of good men."

"Like currants in a dough-cake."

"Oh, by the way, who is the lady at Tadley House with chestnut hair, and—and—a white dress?"

"Oh! . . . *that* prim piece! *She's* up yon, is she?"

Again her tongue curled up her word in disdain.

"Such a lady as I describe is there," said I gravely.

"It'll be Miss Ida Dowson—Mrs. Ashley's cousin."

"Yes?" said I, partly eager to hear more and partly shrinking from it.

"There's no more to say," said she, rising.

I got up, too.

"Save that there's nought so queer as folk," she remarked, lighting me a candle.



CHAPTER V.

THE beginning of my long "to-morrow" deferred itself until the day but one after my first meeting with Ida Dowson. Then I encountered her in the library.

The library was the worst-furnished room in Tadley House. To be sure, there were book-shelves against all four walls, and a plentiful store of books within them—and a room filled with books has ever an inviting look—but the sofas and chairs were in horse-hair, an uneasy method of upholstery, unfitted to the ends of the place. Indeed, the library shared, I found, the speciousness of its owner's character. There was no root of understanding within it. The meaning of the genuine book-lover was evaded. It was but a paltering

equivocation of book-collection, the librarian having been somehow at cross purposes with the reality of the mission. It did not even rise to being a shelving of the standard authors, bought handsomely at so much a yard.

At my first entry into the room, my heart ran before me in expectation. I passed over the horse-hair seats with a hasty pardon because of the appearance of stored riches about me, and went forward to the first batch of shelves.

“Here has the rubbish been shot!” cried I, with my eyes moving to the next set.

Again the specious invitation, and again the empty evasion ; and so on, as I travelled round the room, searching and feeling with eyes and fingers for that something upon which the intellectual faculty within me could fasten. Round that room twice over did I run in my vain quest ; and then I stood in the centre, while the rows of so much material in paper, print, and binding, brazenly twinkled in their character of shifty dissembler, the common

wood of the shelves (for that was plain deal) shrinking under its varnish, as I thought, to be the bearer of so much belieing gilt and gloss.

Where were the august darlings of my intellectual choice? and where my spiritual companions, my age-long voices of the soul of man? And where could I find trace of the dearer modernity of later writers, whose mystery and pique and heart-thrust are yet unresolved by the scrutiny and test of time? I shredded out of the fraudulent mass a cheap copy of Macaulay's essays in unreadable type; an incomplete collection of the works of Hannah More, which a man driven to it by sheer emptiness might make shift to fill himself withal; and a handsomely bound edition of the plays of Shakespeare of some pounds' weight, suitable for conveyance on a trolley.

In the end, I came to an interpretation of those shelves. They represented a history of my employer's compliances to the heterogeneous tastes of local persons he wished to flatter.

This room, such as it was, had been from the first my recognised place of work, and that morning I walked unhesitatingly into it, with no other expectation than to find Mr. Ashley.

Instead of my employer, I discovered the lady of my visions ; and at the sight of her a soft and wonderful cloud of illusion seemed to fall upon my eyeballs, and the distasteful place became suddenly to me as the porch of a beautiful church.

She wore a fawn-coloured gown, neatly braided and close-fitting ; a bow of delicately tinted ribbon showed under her white collar ; some violets were tucked into the breast of her gown, and she had a little vase of them by her side on the table. It was the table usually reserved to my use at which she sat, and there was a pile of new books before her, and she was busy cutting the leaves with an ivory paper-cutter.

The blood mounted to my brow, and I stood, startled and hesitating, upon the threshold,

cheating my mind "with voluntary dreams." She rose, smiling, when she observed my gravity and hesitation, and, with the same charming directness as before, held out her hand. Yet I doubt not it was in answer to something in my eyes. In her manner were gentleness, quietism, and a harmonious completeness that set me at ease. And she told me that the press of work being, in the occasion of the election, heavy, she was directed by her cousin to share in it, her first task being to cut the leaves of a number of new books.

"Are you really to work with me?" I asked, wondering that such a thing should befall.

I took my seat slowly and reverently as to the sacramental table, and then I remarked that the volumes before her were the works of Dr. Comyn.

"The bookseller has been prompt," I observed, and I raised the volumes one by one to make sure that *The Scarlet Woman* was amongst them.

"I dislike these books," said Miss Dowson, with a frown.

"I do not know them," said I.

"They degrade sacred things into mere sensation. I hate the very feel of the leaves," said she.

"Oh!" said I, eager in my service, "let me do the cutting."

She glanced at me with surprise, and slightly drew in her lip.

"Thank you. But no. Have you not your own duty? This is mine. I must not shirk it."

With this presence I seemed to take a tonic of sweet air. The scruples of her conscience, the fixity of her notions, were refreshing after the complacent turbidity of my employer's moral ideas. When I explained the destination of Dr. Comyn's works, she resented it.

"But," said I, "even though Mr. Ashley is a Churchman, he is at liberty to make himself pleasant to a Wesleyan."

"Ah!" said she, crisply and firmly. "But

this is done with a motive. It is not what it seems."

To be sure this was to "cut a cummin seed" with conduct, but it commended itself to me as proving a sensitive rectitude of nature.

Week by week, Ida Dowson and I sat at work together at the same table, seeming by mere proximity to acquire mutual knowledge, but in reality tasting intercourse only as one tastes occasional sweets from a box on the shelf, and never so meeting as to watch one another at the rough-and-ready meal of life. My employer was always present to hurry and drive the pair of coadjutors whose wills were at least united in the matter of dislike to him.

I observed in Miss Dowson the nature as well as the training of a Puritan; her colour, in its rose-leaf purity, suited the decorum of her features and the precision of her thought-forms. And, by and bye, I thought I discerned that my growing love was returned. Under the stirring of that love, the face, in its innocent hardness, melted and softened, and an

adorable expansion (which I took for development) altered her nature. In this time of her love she was more and greater than herself.

She was religious, but her religion was, I thought, rather passively strong than with fervour. It was cloistered, and its practice in limitation and check. The habit of repression gave, I thought, an exquisite quality to her love, as though fire should strive to run riot in a crystal. She seemed formed to be one of the saints of the earth—a nun-like creature who might dream of Calvary with her lover's hand upon her.

One day we obtained a quiet hour together. It was stolen, I know not how, by a surprise of favouring circumstance. We sat in a retired corner of the drawing-room, and with my eyes on the china bloom of her face, or wandering over the crisp fineness of her delicate attire, I told the story of the turbulent night on the sea in the days of my childhood, of my own odd words, and of the sequel. And as I spoke, it seemed to me to grow clearer to my mind that

this refined and delicate creature would become a part of that sequel.

"Your prayer saved them," said she, in her cool-toned voice, and with a serious droop of the lids, which charmed me. "You have a vocation. God has called you to give your life to Him."

But that resolve to which I had given conscious voice in Trafalgar Square did not allow itself to be so expressed. My intention stood before me in strong simplicity, and could not endure to be so dressed and adorned, so that I took refuge from the honour of her words under the covert of light ones. And, indeed, the gravity of my love-making was rimmed with laughter, as was natural to a man of full vitality like myself.

"My parents," said I, "on the one side, thought the event a sign that I was destined for the ministry. Peter Labrum, on the other, thought I escaped but to put my head in a noose."

I felt laughter under my lids as I tried

to look into her eyes. She gave a distant smile.

"Why not be a minister?" she slowly said, drawing the thin fingers of one slim hand through the thin fingers of the other.

"Because I can take no step that marks me off in any measure from the men and the world I love."

"Love not the world," said she.

"That's a text," said I, "certainly; the interpretation is another thing. For my part, I take leave to love the light of the sun on the crest of a wave, and the salt in the air, and 'the breeze blowing over the heath.' But most I love my fellow-men. I want to give them happiness here on the earth. I am the lover of man and womankind."

She seriously drooped her lids, and her mouth faintly, very faintly, contracted. I seemed to myself as a rough bit of uncultured land beside a sweet rose-garden. My frame seemed too large, my breathing too rough, the vitality within me too full. I was a peasant

lad! Should I be able to tutor myself to match this refinement? And was her religion too narrow, too fine-drawn, to accept the scope of mine?

"Are you displeased?" I asked, in pain. "I am going to give my life—"

Then I broke off with a weary sense of falseness, and a distrust of the love-making which was driving me to pose. But the colour came into her cheek, and her eyelids raised themselves hesitatingly. The warning of my heart sank back into silence.

"I *have* given *my* life," said she, with an emphasis on the past that disparaged, while assuring, my future.

And her lip quietened itself after the slightest quiver, and tempted my pursuit by that stillness—pursed a little, so that I was reminded of consciousness on a cherry.

"If *both* gave our lives together," I murmured, with my peasant's mouth warmly near her delicate ear. She moved a little further from me, and her blush was adorable, but calm.

In that moment God or Fate was merciful.
I had my chance.

The door opened before my suggestion reached the substance of petition or an answer was possible. It was my employer's wife who entered. The rustle of her skirts once more brought commonplace day with them, and so did her gesture as, coming forward into the room, she looked round for tea, raising her eyebrows as she saw the deserted tray. Then came the consciousness of our presence. There was an imperceptible pause before she threw to our corner the glance that touched us both back to our senses—or, I should say, touched *me* back. I rose to my feet, remembering our relative positions, and, confessing in my colour both my temerity and my sense of it, strode to the door. Glancing back for a moment before I passed through it, I saw Ida standing before her relation with a composure that showed as a worshipful piece of courage for love's sake.

I walked straight down to the village to-

wards Maver Hall ; and though nothing definite had taken place, it seemed as though I trod always round the brink of a heavenly event.

And in this mood I walked into the kitchen, where Mary Maver stood toasting my bread for evening tea. I took the wooden arm-chair which belonged to her brother, and sat down upon it. Scores and scores of times since have I seen Mary toasting my bread at a kitchen fire, but when in my mind I recall her figure in that attitude, I see the dress, and feel the atmosphere of the occasion, and hear the words that came after.

The eight-day clock ticked on, and I lost consciousness of my present position in the thought of the one I had vacated. I was recalled to myself by Mary's voice.

"Lad !" said she.

I looked up to find her face bent seriously towards me.

"Well, Mary ?" said I, smiling, for I liked her well, and many quaint talks had perfected our friendliness.

"Dost know," said she, "how rare and lusty thou art?"

And with an odd, direct movement of her head, she indicated my long limbs and my broad shoulders.

"Well, Mary," said I, "I began life as a fisher's child, and knew something of the sea, and when they set me to my books I practised athletics for exercise. Besides," said I, "the men of my family have always been of a fairish size."

"Aye," said she; "'t is bred in thee."

Then she looked me in the eyes.

"Thou 'rt bonnie, too."

"Well, Mary?"

"And thou 'rt, maybe, four or five and twenty."

"Four," said I.

She turned back to the fire and considered the toast.

"Yon's a good age. Rare, lusty, bonnie, and four-and-twenty. Have a care, lad."

"What of?"

She took the toast to the table and spread the butter. I could see her profile, serious and with a touch of grimness, bending over her work under the big frilled cap.

"There 's women that note such things."

My eyes laughed, for 't was she had catalogued me.

"I 'm not counting myself," said she, with a dry directness that forced me back to gravity ;
"but there 's others !"

"Who ?" said I, with my veins tingling.

"There 's them above you. Silky and soft—no match for a sturdy lad who's got the salt o' the sea in him. No more a match than ivy 's a match for the oak tree. Aye ! Singin' birds may build in the ivy, and twitter pratty enough. But ivy brings down t' oak i' the end."

"I don't understand you," said I, with dignity, and feeling as though her words were hot things in my palms.

"There 's them at Tadley House."

"I agree with you," I returned coldly ;
"there 's no *match* for me there."

"Yo niver spoke a truer word," said she, not without fire.

"And I have no right even to listen to you, I have not indeed. I know nothing save that she to whom you refer has urged me to give my life to—*God*."

And I reverently bent my head.

"Aye! There's folk over ready to bid others do that. *Give* thy life? Keep it for thyself, lad! I'd have folk be a bit lenient with their advice to others to give themselves away. Let 'em begin on theirsels."

She cut the toast with sharp, crisp strokes.

"I should be sorry to get angry with you, Mary," said I, looking at her in pained astonishment.

"Be as angry as thou wilt, lad; I can make shift to bear it. Only be on thy guard against a face like a picture, and chestnut hair, and eyes like coffee-berries. Brown don't match with black. If thou must have fair, get a grey-eyed woman. Grey eyes means true and tender. Grey eyes 'ull comfort thee at the last.

But coffee-brown under chestnut—that 's not for thee. Nor over-much church-going, nor level, smooth tones like a continual dropping. A sharp word now and then 's better. 'T will be human, at least. And thou 'rt a red-blooded man."

I stood straight up in silent wrath. She glanced at me calmly.

"Aye!" said she, measuring me with that odd, direct movement of her head, "thy poll nears th' rafters. Thou 'rt Saul amongst the prophets. Religion or no religion, thou 'rt a big, red-blooded man. Red blood must n't wed wi' milk and water. 'T ain't nature, and religion can't mend that."

My wrath exploded.

"I am very angry," I cried; "you do wrong to speak this way. There are not grounds for it."

"Lord send!" she ejaculated firmly.

I strode towards the door.

"Besides," I cried, "besides—"

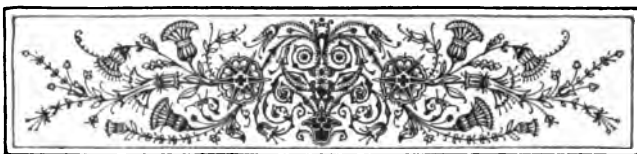
She looked at me, and suddenly her cheek

blanched, and she dropped the knife, and clasped her hands to her breast.

“Lord in heaven ha’ mercy !” she cried ;
“ I ’m too late.”

The tones were fraught with sincere anguish.
I strode out, banging the door behind me, for
I had now no mind for tea.





CHAPTER VI.

MY anger sank directly, and then I felt as a child who has been roughly shaken by a kind mother's hand.

I directed my steps up one of the hilly streets of the village, turning my eyes hither and thither on the romantic valley in which the scattered houses were built; and I went beyond the houses to a rocky cleft, tufted with clinging trees and verdure, at the bottom of which a torrent tumbled. On the highest part of the precipice I seated myself. It was warm, and sunny, and still. A field of thin, dry pasturage spread away behind, and the noise of the water reached me from below. If I looked around I could see tips of distant hills and peeps of moorland country in between the

nearer landscape. If I looked between my knees, I saw scanty grass and small clover snatching a brief scared life out of the thin nourishment of the soil. And as I sat thus on the drowsy edge of things, thinking of Mary Maver's words, my spiritual eyes opened, and I saw myself suspended between my past and my future, hanging in a balance betwixt the story of my life, as I knew it and designed that it should remain, and an unknown story which hardly seemed my own, but of which the prevision had me by the hair. And, as this feeling deepened, I was suddenly aware of an impulse spurring me to flight. It was as though a bell-like alarum rang a warning.

I rose to my feet and made a step or two down the hill in overwhelming haste to be gone. But the movement of my body freed me from the exceptional condition, and I sank back to my normal state, the sharpening of spiritual insight returning to the ordinary dulled habit. I looked at my watch. Things shrank again to common proportions, and an

engagement that evening at Tadley House assumed its usual obligation. I was ready to tread back into the monotony of daily courses; and yet in the beginning of my going, the scant grass and the shrunk clover, on which my eyes were bent, looked not quite the same. The spiritual insight lost so quickly from my mind lingered over the small things at my feet.

The doors of Tadley House received and closed upon me again, and the cloud of pleasant illusions fell once more. There stood Ida amidst the dim lights and beautiful furnishing of the hall. Our eyes met, and for one second I held hers; then with a grave bow she evaded me.

I went on to the library and the evening's work. She was not present; and I remarked that my employer put additional patronage into his bearing.

I returned to Maver Hall late and in flat spirits. Mary awaited me as usual, and a meal was prepared and spread on the table,

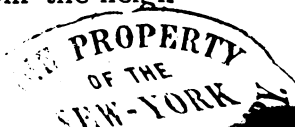
at which, having eaten nothing for tea, I was glad. And, with the memory of our misunderstanding in my mind, I thanked her more gratefully than was common ; and, raising my eyes to see if the cloud had passed away on her side, perceived that her lids were swollen by weeping.

"Lad," said she, "I should n't have spoken as I did. My tongue ran ahead of my judgment. Forgive me."

"Oh, Mary!" I returned, "the wonder is how I could have been angry with you!"

"Good-night," said she ; and she left me that evening to light my own candle for myself.

After this, some days of my life passed in a dull suspense. The withholding of opportunity fed my desire for more. I sat at my work in the horse-hair library alone, missing the romantic presence which had tinged prosaic hours. And yet I found within myself no strong motions to an active pursuit ; and I doubt not had the lady been withdrawn from the neigh-



bourhood, I had had that common experience to find this urgent matter sinking down amongst the passing incidents of life. But not to so small a pattern were the threads to be woven between us. One day a garden path, retired from the house, saw our chance meeting ; and, while I was ready with my welcome, she turned aside, seeming to avoid the occasion of passing me close at hand. With this I became piqued and angry.

“You are forbidden to see me?” I cried in my heat.

“My cousins desire me to avoid you,” she replied.

“Is it your wish to obey?”

“I think it my duty to do so.”

“Ida, is it the choice of your heart to obey?” I demanded, pressed by indignation beyond my intention.

She was trembling, and yet remained mistress of her word.

“Do you not see, Mr. Whapshare,” she corrected me, “I have been a dependent on

my cousins all my life, and their wishes are very binding on me ?”

“ We will find something more spontaneous than that to base our conduct on,” I cried.

At my words I read in her eyes both satisfaction and hope, but she maintained a demeanour more rigid than that look, allowing me no more than a hint of complacency, for she slightly shook her head and turned away, her lip tightening itself to sad resolves. Thus played between yielding and resistance, I came into a transport of desire to win her from her confining ideas, picturing myself as a knight before a fortress, and the lady of my dreams as the enchanted maiden within.

Meanwhile, that other siege of souls, the election campaign, continued, and, in my intercourse with the villagers, I found that though many had been caught by the fair words and colourable deeds of Mr. Ashley, a strong minority refused to move his way. Amongst this minority were John Maver and his friends.

Now, it was no business of mine to act as

election agent for Mr. Ashley, yet I had constantly to resist an endeavour to press and wriggle me into a service to which I was not engaged. It was, for example, becoming more and more a hot subject between us, that I made no effort to upset the conclusions of a man I respected in his favour. John Maver was a formidable foe in the heart of the Liberal territory, for, being of sturdy character, he was influential, and his vote carried others with it. And I was not long in discovering that his house had been recommended to me as a place of residence, under the impression that I should recognise my best interest to lie in such an assiduous pursuit of serviceableness to my employer, as should result in undermining the principles of John. Besides that such an enterprise would have been futile, it was one not in accordance with my ideas. But Mr. Ashley was not the man to comprehend the differences of temperament between individuals. Just as there are self-righteous persons who spend their time and tempers in exacting their own pattern

of right conduct from a various world, so are there self-persuaded persons who insist that the low standard of behaviour of their own adoption, is the normal estimate of morality to which healthy-minded persons must comply.

As soon as Mr. Ashley recognised that I had my own persuasions, from which I did not budge, the situation between us became strained. He could not recognise the limits of service to which a man engages himself for a moderate salary, and it angered him to discover that I did my daily portion, but held myself aloof from dirty work.

Amongst other arrangements advancing to completion was the Methodist tea-party, under the management of Mr. Snape. Mr. Snape was so amenable to Mr. Ashley's moulding that I had not anticipated a difficulty. But one evening I met the little mill-owner stepping down the drive with extraordinary rapidity, and with a face so heated that I could not but surmise some wound to his self-love, and some ruffling of his temper.

My impression was confirmed. In the drawing-room, I discovered, was the main action played from which Mr. Snape had made his exit. Mr. and Mrs. Ashley were there, but Ida was the heroine of the piece. Mr. Ashley strode angrily to and fro; Mrs. Ashley, with her proud, cold face, and her silks about her, kept a reserved displeasure on the sofa. Ida, on a seat by the window, defended one of those scruples of the conscience which excited both my perplexity and my admiration. But if I could have desired the occasion to be wider, the manner was beyond criticism. Her voice was low and gentle, and her aspect frail and feminine, while unalterably resolved.

"Clara, I cannot do it," I heard her say. "I am a Churchwoman, and I will not sing 'I know that my Redeemer liveth' at a Methodist tea-party. I could not sing those sacred words at a political meeting—not, at any rate, *such* a political meeting."

"You insult me, Ida," said Mr. Ashley.

"You are absurd and unreasonable," said

Mrs. Ashley. "You are requested to sing a sacred piece of music to an audience likely to be influenced for the better by the religious nature of the words,—a familiar and beautiful text ; and the meeting is to be held in an undenominational hall, in support of your own Liberal principles. I disapprove this separation of the spirit of religion from politics. By your refusal you cast a slur upon your cousin and benefactor, offend Mr. Snape, and endanger the interests of the Liberal party. I can characterise such conduct in no other way than as wicked."

While the one lady thus summed up and magnified the delinquencies of the other, her husband perceived my undesired presence in the rear of the room, and, being no coward, the exchange of an opponent frail as Ida for a man taller and younger than himself, acted as a stimulus. He fronted me now with a threatening and impudent expression of face, such as an ill-bred fellow might permit himself to show to an inferior. And here, too,

was the opportunity to allow those differences of temperament which had lain between us as smouldering fires to leap up in flame.

"Whapshare," he boisterously addressed me, "we owe this unseemly family discussion to your influence!"

The remark revealed my presence to Ida, and from her eyes, and the unguarded cry that escaped her, I read her need of and joy in my appearance. Upon that I took my resolution, and, pushing past Mr. Ashley, walked up to the girl and placed my hand on her shoulder, making, through this silent gesture, my claim to be reckoned with in the matter.

The lifted eyebrows and affronted face of Mrs. Ashley threw me an answer to my challenge.

Ida, warming my heart by the most unequivocal glance I had as yet received from her eyes, seized the occasion to walk from the room. And none being left save myself

to receive the tempest, it fell now upon shoulders well able to bear it.

Thus did I arrive at a crisis in the affairs between my employer and myself. A couple of hours later I closed the door of the horse-hair library for the last time, and walked away, a man free of employment, but with the consolation of half-a-year's salary in my pocket. And being now flushed with determination—beholding my decision, as it were, dashed out within my mind in strong, quick lines—I despatched a note to Ida asking her to meet me in the garden, and making the terms of my letter as pressing and peremptory as I could.

I selected my spot within the shrubbery, and waited there until darkness had gathered. My mood was not one to be trifled with, opposition, together with my commiseration for the girl, binding me to my point; and yet my heart beat slow and small, and underneath was a reserved determination to sink the matter in oblivion should she fail me

now. She did not fail me. By and bye the solitude was broken by her tread, and she ran up to me with light quick steps, along a path between the trees, her evening dress and hair concealed by a hooded cloak.

"I have come to thank you again, Mr. Whapshare," said she.

"There is only one form of thanks I shall take," said I, seizing and retaining her hand.

That won nothing from her lips, but her hand lay quiet in my palm.

"I am going away," said I.

"Ah!" And I thought she permitted the syllable to betray her.

"I have received my dismissal from your cousin, and he has paid me off to-night."

"Your dismissal?" It was beautifully delivered in a manner suspended between reticence and regret.

"I am not the kind of use to him that he expected I should be."

"No ; not that kind of use."

“And I should never have made myself necessary to him in that way.”

“I know it.”

The last expressed a quietude of faith in me flattering to my manhood. This was no rich antiphony of love-making, carrying the lovers on and beyond themselves. But it was delicately attuned to a young man's notions. Each word of my lady was singled out by propriety and a retreated femininity; it left me all the recognised privilege of my sex, so that I perceived if we were to bring the matter between us one inch further on the way, I must circumvent the cautious modesty of her tongue and bearing by my own directness. Her hand still lay in mine, passive and cool; I pressed it, and bent nearer to her ear.

“Will you come with me when I go?” I whispered.

“What do you mean?” she whispered back.

“Will you marry me—be my wife—and go with me the rest of the way?” said I,

paying down the full golden coin of the man.

It was too dark to see her face, but she stood as still as though she had ceased to breathe. And I might surmise my words affected her. Having said all, I had a mind to await my response.

"I can't think clearly," she presently observed; "my cousins even object to our friendship."

"I am asking you to be my wife."

"Oh! I am not prepared for such a thing!"

"I cannot stop for you to weigh this and that scruple," said I; "you must tell me—is it yes or no?"

"I was not expecting this!"

I took her suddenly in my arms, and pressed her against my breast.

"You *are* my wife," said I, as I let her go again.

She trembled and seemed much affected, so that I supported her with my arm.

"I do not see how it can ever happen!"

I heard her murmur in a distraught whisper to herself.

"Leave that to me," I answered; "for example:—meet me here to-morrow night, the night of the Methodist tea-party, and we will escape together."

"Oh!" said she, her voice shaken with alarm and doubt; "that could not possibly be right."

"It is the only thing left," I replied.

"To run away from those who have supported and been kind to me all the days of my life?"

"They are not kind now."

"But they have a sort of right in me. Oh! how difficult life has become!"

I drew her slightly towards me—and waited. She sank voluntarily within my arms.

"There is no room left for quibbles now," said I. "You must come with me—follow me."

"When?"

"To-morrow night."

"Why?"

“Because of *this*.”

In the end she consented.

“Everything is changed,” she murmured.

“I pray God I am right.”

It was thus I won my wife. And the night and the next day passed as a dream, my changed experience before me. I intended, when the morning came, to seek Mary Maver, and to confide to that staunch soul the event that had befallen me ; and it may be that the interview before me caused me some uneasiness, for I caught myself more than once picturing the look with which the taciturn face I liked might receive my news. But when morning came, it was Mrs. Maver who placed my breakfast on the table, and Mary did not appear. I waited in vain. The time sped on, and I could not delay my preparations. Finally I was forced, with unfeigned regret, to dismiss the idea of bidding farewell to Mary, an ungraciousness of behaviour I could ill support in myself. But I was bound to my own matters, and so settled my account with John and his

wife, giving them what reasons I could devise for my departure.

My belongings having been deposited at the station of Millbottom, I now returned to await the appointed hour in the garden of Tadley House. And being there, I passed through an interval of suspense, during which I explained the deep misgiving of my heart as a fear of my lady's timid defection. There was not cause for such alarm. She arrived with admirable punctuality, the sound of her light, quick steps presaging her appearance through the darkness. This time she wore no cloak, and had but her evening gown, a white shawl being thrown about her head and neck. Thus attired, she appeared more like a spirit than a woman ; and I was ready to interpret it as an evidence of feeling that decorum was thus in the final moment discarded.

" My cousin Clara did not go to the entertainment, but remained at home," she whispered, as she came up with me. " I escaped as I was through the open drawing-room window."

"My brave girl has been true!" I cried.

"Could you doubt I should be *true*?" she answered, with surprise in her tone. "But this unsuitable dress!"

"I will take you in whatever attire," I replied; and then I got her hand in mine, and, choosing the grass for our steps, began to run towards the drive. I did not think, and I could feel nothing. We ran together, hand in hand, down the winding, tree-shaded drive, through the darkness of the night. But here it was not so black as amidst the trees of the shrubbery; and, glancing at her more than once, I saw her face, under the white "cloud," pale, but resolved, the eyes always fixed on me. I felt the frail fingers in mine; I heard the swift, light patter of her feet beside me. It was thus that we two escaped into a life of our own.

We arrived at the station. Ida huddled the white cloud over her face, and, at my sign, shrank back into an inconspicuous spot. I had the tickets, and went forward on to the

platform alone, inquiring after my portmanteau. I remarked a very considerable quantity of luggage collected there in a heap. Amidst the boxes, still as a statue, a woman was seated. As I approached I called the porter, and asked if that was the luggage for the London up-train, and if my portmanteau was amongst it.

But at my speech the woman started, and that so awkwardly it caught my attention, and brought me to bend my eyes earnestly upon her, and with that I stood still, stricken dumb with astonishment and perplexity. And then she rose from her seat, and came forward to stand before me ; and I caught one haggard glance from Mary Maver's eyes. But even as I gazed, still speechless with amazement, she returned to her taciturn and inexpectant bearing ; and I became conscious that Ida had followed, and was now by my side ; whereupon Mary took from her arm a long cloak, and, shaking it from the folds, placed it about the shoulders of my lady, who, in her turn, ad-

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justed the hood upon her head. I watched these trivial actions as though I were spectator of something indefinitely painful. But Ida, thus arrayed, was trimly prepared for a night journey, and, all being complete, she lightly placed her hand upon my arm.

"Stephen," she murmured, "I wrote to her; I begged her to come. It was the best I could do. It was necessary for *me*, you understand."

Her voice was faint but firm. It was the first time she had called me by my name. I wondered why it hurt me.

"Are all these your boxes?" I inquired absently.

"Yes," she replied.

I stared at the heap.

"Mary managed it for me," Ida added.

I glanced at Mary. She stood silent, with downcast eyes.

"Thank you, Mary," said I; but I felt the colour mounting to my brow, and my feeling was deeply ruffled.



CHAPTER VII.

I ARGUED against this feeling. Ida had behaved with foresight, firmness, and decorum. These are valuable qualities. Her impetuous flight from the drawing-room window had touched me ; but it was at least convenient that she should provide against the contingency of being unable to secure out-door apparel at the last moment. It is not the reckless and eccentric, it is precisely traits such as she had exhibited, which a man desires as an accompaniment through life.

I found myself at fault in my uneasiness.

We arrived at St. Pancras in the small hours of the morning, and my first duty was to see to the heaping of the luggage on the cab. It was a lengthy business, performed in the face

of some expressions from the cabman. When all was duly arranged, Ida put her head from the window and beckoned me near.

"I know of a quiet temperance hotel where I am sure they will take us—Mary and me—in," said she, in the same faint whisper as before.

With the mention of Mary's name, my eyes somewhat gloomily sought into the interior of the cab, where I saw her seated in her ordinary taciturnity by Ida's side.

I directed the cabman to drive to the place mentioned, and feeling myself unmistakably dismissed, sought my own lodging elsewhere.

Thus, by a decorum and propriety of behaviour in the eye of the world, which appealed to my admiration, if it a little chilled my romance, suspicion and gossip were warded off until the appointed time of residence passed by. And then one morning I came and took Ida Dowson to church (Mary attending as witness), and we were married.

Our position as we entered upon matrimony was not unprosperous. It was true that those

far-reaching aims to which I designed my life were suspended for a while, in deference to new duties and interests ; but that was no worse than it had been. I looked upon them as but reserved, and, indeed, came a step further in this secret matter, for I sought and obtained a passing engagement with a social reformer, in whose service I hoped to acquire knowledge useful to my own end. He was a poor man, and could afford me pay no higher than two pounds a week ; but then in my pocket was the better part of the sixty pounds with which Mr. Ashley had dismissed me ; while my wife—and this I learnt with surprise—was, it appeared, in receipt of one hundred a year in her own right. With these means, it seemed to me, we might cut our cloth with a flourish, and at least set out on the enterprise of a common home without anxiety, and even provide for Mary into the bargain.

Neither of us desired to part with Mary. In the unaccustomed dignity of my new position, I, on occasion, saw in that taciturn but

serviceable presence the most solid basis for an expectation of happiness we possessed.

Meanwhile, the dear stranger I had taken to myself was my daily study. She exhibited in the interval before our marriage that thrift and providence in love-making I had marked from the beginning. It chafed me, but I found her unassailable in reserve. I remained, for the most part, "friend" and "Mr. Whapshare"; an old-fashioned courtesy pinned me at a distance, and if her lips discoursed of affection, her eye forbade me to embrace her too near. But the ceremony over, all was changed! The love-making began with the signing of the marriage lines, and in other matters, where she had evinced determination to guide events, she now dropped to the rear, and handed me the reins with a deference and submission agreeable to my pride. As for the little *ménage*, it was carried on between the women with economy and diligence; nor were the details allowed to disturb me other than a whispered conclave outside

the door in a morning. Surrounded by conduct so exemplary, the thought occasionally intruded as to how my native roughness and restless vitality, should they escape my guard upon them, would affect my wife. I could not but remark that, considered in relation to her, there seemed in every way to be too much of me. And since I knew not how further to curtail myself, I whimsically cast about in my mind as to whether I could correct the misfit by bringing her up in some measure to my dimensions. I would not, for example, admit that the difference in our intellectual points of view was incurable. I thought it a matter of training rather than capacity, and made it my resolve to knit up this gap in the texture of our union.

One night I suggested that we should read together regularly, I playing the *rôle* of tutor, she of pupil, and at this her face adorably brightened.

"My dear husband," said she, clasping my arm.

I laid my hand smilingly on hers, and little dreamed that in this moment of the near familiarity of the body, our spiritual parts turned the one from the other, and began their separate journeys, nor once again met or touched until the hour of our great catastrophe.

"What book shall we choose first? Is it to be real study?" she asked.

"Real study," said I.

"Then let it be *Paley's Evidences*. I long to strengthen my religious faith upon the intellectual side; I should like to prove myself under my husband's guidance."

This touched while it embarrassed me. My intention was quite other than this idea. I desired to shake the fixity of her thought-forms, and to withdraw her too-concentrated gaze from the one topic, and open out newer subjects and fresher points of view. I must proceed with caution, for I perceived that she was yet in ignorance of the motions of my mind on a different plane from hers, and

had made no discovery of the distinct pastures where my spirit fed.

"Not *Paley's Evidences*," I said, "but a newer, fresher form of study."

"And what?" said she.

"A study of the facts of this world—of thought as it now is. I propose to read some of the modern authors."

She withdrew her hands from my arm, and slid her wedding-ring up and down her slender finger.

"I am *afraid*," she whispered gravely.

"What of?"

"Of poisoning my mind—infecting my spirit."

"I do not anticipate that," said I, frowning a little. "I anticipate that your thoughts will be added to and deepened."

She looked round about the room in anxious irresolution, twisting her wedding-ring on her finger the while.

"I shall choose the books for you, Ida," said I, with a slight emphasis.

She put both hands in mine, and raised her face with a trusting smile ; and thus I won a barren victory.

Perceiving with how much caution I must proceed, I selected my first volume with care. It must be something on her own lines, with a difference. And that which I chose was the *Apologia pro vita sua*.

In the evenings, I read aloud that great, that moving book. Now, it happened one night that I became deeply affected with the matter before me, so that I was unable to proceed. When my voice failed me, I had read the following words :

"I feel His hand heavy upon me without intermission, who is all wisdom and love, so that my heart and mind are tired out, just as the limbs might be from a load on one's back. That sort of dull aching pain is mine."

The book fell on my knee. From our sitting-room we could see little save the chimneys of opposite houses, against a sky that was sometimes beautiful. The sky was beautiful

now with the evening star, so often a beacon to my thoughts, shining in the 'midst of it. The room itself was tasteful with Ida's care. From the kitchen came the small sounds of Mary's household activity which kept us spruce and bright from day to day; and my wife, sewing as she always did at night, sat beside me. But in spite of the dear prose of these surroundings, perhaps because of them, the words penetrated my heart of hearts, so that I suffered with the soul pitched to so high and rare a key, who could return to the hand laid heavy upon him "without intermission" nothing but the profound sweetness of these seizing words.

"Stephen!"

My eyes moved from the evening star to the face of my wife. She was looking earnestly upon me, and the work had dropped on her knee.

"Yes?" I asked dreamily.

"Do you think that it is wise to read a book like this? It seems to me, such an insidious in-

fluence. You are not being carried away by the arguments?"

"Good God, Ida!—*No*."

And I closed the book. For some reason which I did not understand, I could not continue the reading that night.

And yet I persevered, nor were we always at such evident cross-purposes. So that still about my mind I wrapt the foolish hope that my endeavours, being honest, must close in success.

At length, as the weeks went on, I took the bold courage to suggest a visit to that mimic world the theatre, promising myself that the display of the drama would bring the mind of this gentle lady to a more open apprehension of the stupendous natural forces that hunt the blind moth, man, about the four walls of his limitations, and of the desperate chance it is that he—driven of impulses he neither chooses nor understands—may flutter towards the straight, small loop-hole of escape without some damage to his wings.

We went early, so as to win a place in the front row of the gallery, the measure of our purse allowing no easier accommodation. But Ida whispered to me that so long as she was with me, she was pleased with any situation ; the interval of waiting was, to be sure, tedious, but with housewifely forethought she had provided against that, and whipped from her pocket her knitting-needles and set to work with them. I was left to my newspaper and my roving eyes, and, making use of these, I observed in the front row of the gallery opposite, a face which my glance having touched, the movement of my heart strangely followed. It was the face of a woman that so surprised and held my attention. She leaned forward, with her elbows on the cushion and her chin in her hands, her eyes now glancing about on the people, and then quiet, as though fixed in thought. Her attitude adorned the particular formation of her head and face, the brow being broad, and the skull finely arched, above delicate features. She had dark hair, fine strong eyebrows, and

those grey eyes Mary told me I might trust. I could not see the chin, but the nose was sensitive and the mouth had the characteristic of eloquence. I summed it up as a beautiful, daring, changing face, full of thoughts and sympathies. She was slim and young, carelessly though gracefully dressed, and had already discarded her hat and gloves.

And presently the grey eyes, glancing about the place, noted my concentrated gaze ; they steadied for a moment, faintly lit up, and then withdrew.

The curtain rose. My wife replaced her knitting in the bag, and composed her face to attention.

Moving and interesting though the play was, I found a superior attraction in the face of the girl opposite, and more than once lost something of the story, or read it, by reflection, in the changing and intelligent sympathy of her expression. How beautiful were the glistening of the grey eyes, and the play of the mouth, and the eagerness of the little chin ! The slim,

unmarried hand now and then clenched itself on the cushion in answer to the emotions of the stage. Looking back to that occasion, and having regard to the feeling of satisfaction, and even of familiarity, with which my eyes rested themselves on this face, I have had motions of the mind in favour of the theory of reincarnation ; as though we two, looking one on the other as strangers of earth, were yet friends and relations of older time, and recognised it with the hidden man of the heart.

Turning more than once towards Ida to discover how she took the spectacle, I remarked several times that she sat with downcast lids and tightened lips.

“ You are not ill, dearest ? ”

“ Oh, no.”

“ Nor tired ? ”

“ Oh, no.”

“ Do you see the girl in the opposite gallery ? ”

“ Where ? ”

“ Take the glasses, dearest. She has such an interesting face.”

"Oh, Stephen! There's nobody with her except another girl."

"It's a *matinée*. It's all right even if she were alone."

When the curtain went down for the last time, I lost sight of the woman with the grey eyes and eloquent mouth, for she hurried away almost at once, and that without her companion. Ida took a little time with her cloak. I had become proud of my wife's dressing, once the boxes were unpacked, but sometimes it chafed me that she was so long. At last we got out into the Strand.

"Well, did you enjoy it?" I asked, placing her hand in my arm, and giving it a fond little squeeze as I did so.

"Not altogether," she faltered timidly.

"Oh, did n't you?" cried I, disappointed.

"Don't be vexed with me, dear," said she anxiously.

"Vexed!" I rather shouted, because of the noise of traffic and passers-by. "Of course not."

"Did *you* like it?"

"What?" said I sharply.

For she spoke very low, and that was absurd when so much noise and the irritation of cities were around us.

"Oh, Stephen, dear!"

She plucked her hand from my arm, and looked at my face with a startled glance.

"I beg your pardon, Ida. Yes, I did hear. I only meant that there's so much noise and bustle about us. The stream of a great world, you know, my love, going one way, and not caring one jot about a pair of lovers walking the other."

I took her hand, and replaced it on my arm. She nestled up to me. A rough fellow, backing suddenly from a shop window, ran up against her, and wanted to know what she was doing with her "blooming parasol."

"Oh, Stephen! What language—what roughness!"

"Better put the sunshade down," said I.

She did so reluctantly.

"The sun burns," murmured she.

"Look here, Ida!" cried I, glancing at the delicate bloom I loved and admired so much; "we'd better take a cab—a hansom, just for once!"

"Oh, Stephen, dear! We are too poor. Never mind my face."

And she cleared up the cloud which had settled on it.

I hailed a hansom.

"But I do mind. Come, jump in. Just for once. We can stand a shilling somehow."

"Oh, it feels *so* wrong. A hansom!"

She drew a breath, and sat rather upright, her hand laid on the doors as though ready to jump out.

"Come," said I, laughing; "sit close in your corner and enjoy!"

She obeyed at once.

"I can't help thinking how many other things the shilling would have bought," breathed she, as she leaned back; "two bars of soap, for example."

"It's buying *this!*" said I, turning to the window upon my side, and that with a little impatience.

The streets were not a dumb show to me; I found them a rolling pageant of life, splendid and gay; and in the retreated corners I discovered many a moving incident from the tragi-comedy of human existence. There was a well-dressed drunkard clutching at a doorway, and turning his perplexed, ashamed eyes about him to discover if the passing crowd observed his condition. It was human, and won a thought of fellowship. And there, amidst a sorry procession of sandwich-men, fell the beautiful chance of mirth—one forlorn creature of the row rising so far above his misery as to crack a joke with the miserable rogue before him, which, running from mouth to mouth, brought a jolly air over the whole fantastic file of rags. Looking after the joker with a softening eye, I became conscious of a sudden radiance falling upon the scene—of a transfiguration as though light were added,

or good news had arrived. For now I had caught sight again of the girl from the front row of the gallery, who had paused to buy a "button-hole" from a flower-woman, and, while fastening the blossoms into her dress, had brought, by her kind words, some reflection from her own soul into the face of the seller.

"Stephen!"

A touch was on my arm. I turned to Ida, and found that she was narrowly observing me. I looked back in return; and that was the first time that the chiselled and precise face of my wife smote on my fancy with a most dismaying sense of limit. It was as though I had exchanged a panorama, wide as the roving glance of the eye would have it, for a single peep-hole.

"Yes," said I automatically.

"What are you smiling at?"

"Was I smiling?"

"Yes, in your eyes. And what do you keep staring at?"

"The streets, Ida, just the streets."

"They are so ugly and wicked, I can hardly

bear to look. I thought you would talk. You have n't said anything about the play."

"Oh, the play! Yes, we should discuss it. I enjoyed it. It was very fine."

Ida's face fell. She put one gloved finger up against her lips, and stared along the street between the horse's ears silently.

"I don't mean that I *agreed* with everything, Ida," said I.

"What do you mean, then? I can't bear to differ from you, Stephen."

"Do we differ? I mean that I found the characters true to nature."

"Oh, Stephen, do you know I was obliged to sit with my eyes shut sometimes!"

"I am sorry for that. If you close your eyes, you close your mind, you know."

"There was n't a single elevated character amongst them."

"No; they were just average human beings, overtaken by a disaster that touched them all."

"There would n't have been a disaster if they had all been good, and done their duty."

"Well, just that kind of disaster would n't have happened, perhaps."

"I don't see what it is you admire."

"There was the character whose unfortunate action brought about the disaster. I thought him most life-like, most *human*. I thought his wrong-doing was precisely the error he, being what he was, would make. And the part was well acted."

"Oh, Stephen, I considered him so inexpressibly wicked!"

"He certainly was n't good."

"And the actor did not seem to put in any reprobation of the sin."

"It would n't be his part to do that."

"What benefit do we get from watching such things? Why can't plays be written that tell about great and good people?"

"Are there any such?"

"How can you ask?"

"And if there were, would it be at all like life to make a play where all the people were what you call great and good?"

"It would at least be an elevating spectacle."

"I am not so sure of that. The juxtaposition of a number of great and good souls might end in disaster of its own kind."

"Oh, Stephen, what can you mean?"

"You see, the general world is imperfect. Things being so, imperfection can move rightly only by aid of imperfection."

"I have never heard you talk like this before. I can't follow you. Oh, Stephen, I don't think I can go to the theatre again!"

"Why not?"

"I am not comfortable. I feel as though we had somehow strayed from the narrow way."

I folded my arms. That "*narrow way*!" Was it not to get out of it I had designed? I did not speak. My spirit eased itself with a finer and more subtle thing than talk, for back ran my thoughts to the girl in the front row, to find there companionship and sweet replies from the eyes and changing features of her understanding face.



CHAPTER VIII.

I HAD passed through the difficulties of the first six months of married life, and had found them to run monotonously enough, with perhaps a tendency in the home to be overplacid, when an event occurred which occasioned so great a concentration of my thoughts upon my wife that I had hardly wits left with which to apply myself to other business. One evening she fainted, and with this began an illness lasting many months, during which she trembled between life and death. My concern for her left no room for grief about the child—the little creature who drew one breath of earth and passed from it. When May of the year following our marriage come round, Ida was out of danger, and so far convalescent as

to lie on the sofa in the sitting-room. Here, with her pillows and light-coloured coverings about her, and the lacy garments she affected, her appearance was of a frail, beautiful saint.

"She'll never pull up May hill," Mary whispered.

But as May went on, she put on flesh and colour, and recovered tone. I could not discover that she was aware of her maternity; she spoke of the time always as "my illness," nor once mentioned or inquired after the baby; on the topic of her motherhood she maintained absolute silence. But then she had manifested the same deep reserve from the beginning.

When in her cheeks and eyes the heralds of health returned, I awaited the occasion when she would put away the paraphernalia of illness, shake off her lassitude, and apply herself again to household duties. But the time went on, and day by day she lay on the sofa, gentle, uncomplaining—even cheerful—but without making any motion towards renewed activity. Then one day, on my urg-

ing her to rise, and tendering my help to that end, I observed that the ability to walk had gone from her.

This discovery changed the tenour of my life. The medical opinion given me was that my wife suffered from a loss of nerve-power, the putting out of the new bud of existence having been beyond her strength; and the advice was that I should remove to some healthful country district, thus lending my wife the one chance of recovery that remained. Our small exchequer was by this time almost empty. I had done all I could to add to our resources during her illness by applying myself to journalism in the leisure left from my work; and I thought I could have laboured with more success at this necessary business of money-making had she not demanded so much of my time and attention.

And now the position became even more difficult in the adjustment; nor was it without pain that I thought myself called on to resign a situation which I had found in many ways

suited to my tastes and powers, and which was at least preliminary to that work to which I had dedicated my life. Indeed, so sharply did I feel this contemplated scission that I purposed an arrangement of my life between town and country; but upon disclosing this idea to my wife, she exhibited great terror at the prospect of my absence during the day, so that the hope had to be abandoned as soon as it was formed. In the midst of my perplexity, I heard of a situation as headmaster in a country village school, and, my necessity hardly allowing me a choice, I applied for the situation, and thought myself fortunate to win it. The pay, fifty pounds a year, and the cottage rent free, was about half that I had been receiving, but the air of the place and the scenery were magnificent; and I encouraged myself to conceive that our exile (for so I deemed it) was but passing.

We possessed a certain supply of simple furniture, but the expenditure required for the move, and for fitting up the cottage with the

comforts needed by my wife, drained my resources to the last penny. For a time Mary and I were compelled to an economy and self-denial which we carefully concealed from Ida.

"Is it anxiety about me that is bringing such great hollows in your cheek, Steve, darling?" asked she one day, laying her frail finger along the sunken outline of my face.

"Yes, dearest," said I hastily.

She turned aside in tears.

"Don't cry, dearest," I whispered in agony.

"I must cry," she murmured back; "it is so sweet, your love for me is so beautiful."

Besides the luxuries suitable to an invalid, Ida found consolation in beautifying the cottage rooms, and this, however careful we were in selection, cost money, which I had not the heart to deny. Again I had been warned to give my wife as much as possible the advantage of an open-air life, and for this purpose a conveyance was necessary. There was not any question what that conveyance must be;

a chaise and pony were beyond our wishes, therefore I set about to procure a second-hand bath-chair. The money to purchase it was only obtained by selling my overcoat and some of my most valuable books. Mary suggested that we should rather part with the spoons; but they had been a present to Ida, and she had a fancy for eating off silver. The bath-chair was the best I could find for my money; but it was heavy and clumsy in appearance, and Ida winced when she saw it.

“Oh, you should have bought one of those lightly hung chairs that are almost pretty, and that run easily!” she cried, as I carried her out of the house.

The bringing of the bath-chair home had cost me my dinner, and perhaps it was due to my enfeebled state that the words thrust to my heart. I explained as well as I could, and we set out on our first journey together.

It was a fair August day, and I brought her right up to the woods.

“Steve, darling,” she said softly, when we

rested, "as long as you are near me, as long as I have your love, and you do things for me, I can bear my great affliction."

Now, after the first pinch of getting settled into the new home, Mary and I found that we were able to estimate the expenses, and even discovered that our frail budget would allow an easier expenditure for our two selves. Thus the pressure of immediate anxiety being removed, the daily existence began to sink into routine once more ; and my powers being no longer strained to a single end, they began to stir with more natural pre-occupations. It was this which brought about the first realisation of my tragical position.

I remember the occasion when the truth flashed on me. It was still summer—that same summer. My day's work in the school being over, I returned home for the evening meal, and then to my task of pushing Ida in the bath-chair. Each day my wife seemed able to go farther, and to desire to go farther. That day I brought her such a distance that

she was fatigued, and when we stopped in the wood amidst the sunshine and sweet aromas, she fell asleep.

Usually, during these bath-chair journeys Ida talked a great deal. Her tongue was loosened to a flow of tiny chatter—as it was natural it should be. Amidst the chatter was always a more serious strain, when she would go over the simple events of her simple day—the books she had read, the portion of Scripture, the prayers, the thoughts she had had. And my aim was always to amuse her in my turn. To-day, when she fell asleep, I was suddenly conscious of a deep and rare relief; and I went a very little distance, and threw myself on the ground; for, I think, owing to my physically weakened condition, I often had a feeling of fatigue.

For a few minutes I bathed myself in the consciousness of silence. The great world flowed about me again. And then my mind began to move, the long-locked thoughts awakened and went out from me, and I saw

them at their wonder-looms, weaving once more the purpose of a man within him.

For half-an-hour I sat there amongst the trees and the silence, planning my own activity, my brain hard at the work of adapting its already earned experience to future building, while I joyfully watched the masterly raising of these airy castles whose foundations were driven deep in the heart and sinews of a man.

Thus I sat multiplying my schemes, and deeming myself one of those merchants of light, whose commerce on this earth is not in precious metals and stuffs, but in ideas; and, indeed, I busied myself with a commonwealth of the imagination and with affairs of statesmanship, in large reaches of thought devising and carrying reforms, and seeing the patch of earth I footed the better for my tread upon it. And, unwittingly, having in my mind a conception of myself as an untired pilgrim in the onset of life, with fate and achievement lying before him, I was ready to throw my

unexpended might—I, a man in the twenty-sixth year—forwards upon the future, unafraid of experience, and proud of difficulty, and having on my lips the matchless prayer of Cleanthes :

“Lead me, O Zeus, and thou, Destiny, whithersoever ye have appointed me to go, and may I follow fearlessly.”

But as I thus came to that illumined moment of a man's existence, when he sees life, not as a thing to be saved, but to be thrown nobly back to the Hands that lent it,—even as I sat rapt and breathless, a thought, before which my free impulse cowered and dwindled, crept up from under covert like an assassin. For did I indeed hold a flawless title-deed of my own possession, or was this estate of my manhood already mortgaged and bartered? My eyes, roving amidst the greenery and sunshine, resting now on this and now on that, and finding in everything a thought and inspiration, had lit on the bath-chair and the sleeping figure in it ; whereon a period was put

to my exquisite aberration, and the finger and thumb of circumstance, reaching to my heart, nipped the beating of it still.

I had awakened from my dreams to recall my marriage, and to find that the "honeymoon" of it had set, and that the woman I had wedded had passed, in the due course of the inevitable change, from the mistress into the wife. *That* was my wife; and *thus* was my destiny conditioned.

For another half-hour I sat as one struck dumb amidst the ruins of his projects, my eyes losing the sight of near things in the blankness of this sudden realisation of general facts. Stretching my hands hither and thither, to feel if there were any release, I touched everywhere on iron limitation. Even upon my limbs I felt, as it were, fetters, so that in the cramping and heaviness of my spirit I seemed to discard physical movement. There was a stirring in the trees, as though someone approached. There might have been a pair of eyes watching. I cared neither to move nor

look. My eyes were blankly fixed, and my teeth and hands clenched.

Somewhere in the universe a vigorous bird of strong flight had been caught by the wing in the iron fangs of a trap, and at each tearing struggle of the pinions to escape, a quiver of pain ran over my heart and face.

The one merciful thing was the continued silence. Ida still slept ; and at last, from sheer mental and physical exhaustion, as one who drops out of a vain struggle, I turned over upon the sward, and myself slept also.

It was getting dusk when I woke, but still it was light. The wind blew a little in the trees, and I feared for Ida. Then I opened my eyes, and found that a figure stood by me, and that a face looked into mine. I did not know what my dreams had been, but the face mingled with them ; and I recognised in it the face of the woman I had watched in the gallery of the theatre ; and so harmonious and simple did I find her presence beside me, that I gazed quietly for full twenty seconds into her

eyes, watching how they looked back into mine, and filled with a beautiful, divine compassion.

It was thus that upon my night of nights rose its single star.

"Stephen! Stephen! oh, *are* you awake?" came a plaintive cry beyond.

I sprang to my feet. The woman moved towards Ida also. I remarked that my wife was folded in a shawl that was not her own.

"I am very much obliged to you," said she, taking the shawl from her shoulders, and preparing to hand it to the stranger.

But the latter shook her head.

"You will need it when you are out of the wood. The wind blows cold on the links. Good-night."

I heard her voice, and then she turned and walked away through the trees.

"Steve, dear," said Ida, as I pushed her along, "why did you fall asleep? I have been frightened. I woke up to find you asleep on the ground at a distance, and that strange girl standing between us. She would not let me

wake you. She took her own shawl and folded me in it."

I gathered from my wife's recital that there had been some little argument between her and the stranger as to my slumber, but that the girl had carried it off with a brightness and good sense that not only won her Ida's liking, but also her own way. And then my wife dropped the information that she had asked permission to come regularly to read with and amuse her.

"That girl said she had often noticed us out-of-doors together. She has a tiny cottage here. Her name is Ellinor Blakemore."

"Ellinor Blakemore," I repeated, my mind closed wondering over the fact of her gentle watch and guard upon my slumbers.

That evening, turning over in my thoughts her offer to add to Ida's little stock of pleasures, I fancied that I had possibly here an opportunity, and suggested to my wife that, had I more leisure, I could do more work, and perhaps earn more money.

"Oh, Stephen ! How nice ! We want money," said Ida, when I told her.

"And, Ida, there are other things ; the things man lives by, which are not bread."

And I hoped that my voice did not tremble.

"I know that," she said seriously. "What should I do without my Bible and my prayers ? my peaceful sense of God's presence and blessing ? How could I bear my affliction if it were not for that ?"

"Yes, dearest," said I ; "of course. I meant just now the energies given us to expend in work for the world. You remember I once told you I had particular designs to that end ?"

I was surprised to find that my throat was hot as with extreme and timid anxiety while I spoke.

"Oh, indeed, I remember ! And I am sure that no one in this world has fulfilled that self-consecration better than you. Look at your teaching of the school children. And the vicar speaks so well of you, and the villagers respect

you. Mrs. Belcher, the washerwoman, says so. And your break with my cousins was a *great* act!"

"I do not seem to myself even to have begun the work I vowed I would undertake. The memory presses me. I have strength. I *must* use it."

"Stephen, *don't* get morbid. I am sure no one has such a good husband as I. I am sure you are more like a saint than a man. You seem to me like an angel leading my poor broken spirit upwards, and keeping my faith alive for me."

I felt my hands trembling a little.

"I meant just to suggest, Ida, that more leisure means more money. Teaching the children in the school hardly draws out my full energies."

"Stephen, dear, indeed I am content."

"Yes, Ida! But if I had more money I could pay someone to take you out for your rides, and in that way I myself could perhaps hoard up strength and time—"

“Stephen !”

I broke off because there was no choice but to do so.

“If we spent the money that way, how should we be better off ! It would divide us.”

I moistened my lips. My palms burnt as if in a fever.

“I was simply thinking that in this way I should make time to do a little work for the world.”

“But your wife ! Your sick wife !”

I could not speak. My head seemed to bend down with shame, and my hands hung loosely between my knees. We were silent for a long time. But I seemed to see her lying on the sofa through my closed lids.

“Stephen !”

“Yes, Ida.”

There was fear in her voice, and her cheek, when I reluctantly looked up, was pale.

“Do you think God wishes it ? If He did —oh ! I think I could bear it ! I would try. The evenings when you come and push me in

the bath-chair seem what I live for. It is the one sweet joy that keeps me in life. All the day I wait for it, and think of it. *Does* God ask me to give them up? I think if He did I *could* do it."

My head had gone down again after the one glance. I seemed to see myself sitting there with my chin in my breast—a strong, big man, with great shoulders and muscles, and with large and capable hands idly hanging between the knees. My forehead, too, was broad, and the black brows underneath fierce and well-developed; a furrow was shaping itself between them. And behind all this beat that horrible thing (to me)—a restless, active brain.

Before I could shape words upon my tongue, the shadows were black in the room, and all the sound was Ida's low, whispered habit of prayer.

"No, Ida, I don't know that God does wish it," I said huskily.




CHAPTER IX.

THAT was my last, my single bid for liberty. My wife was humbly glad—murmuring thanks to God, and clinging about my neck—when next evening I carried her down as before. Her hymns and prayers that evening were all praises.

Thus it went on, and on, and on.

I had been slow to realise my position, but once it laid hold on my consciousness, the grip fastened there. Ellinor Blakemore was the alleviation, her presence the single mitigation of my misery. Other ordinary pleasures ceased one by one to please. The broad sunlight flooding the beautiful landscape made no difference to me. In time it became to me a thing unnatural and horrible that when I went out

into the open air, I went, not free as others go, but pushing before me a burden; that I went, not to the joys of a solitary walk, but always with that little stream of chatter in my ears, that inevitable story of the decay of a body that was putting on flesh, and of the progress of a soul that never went farther. For by inclination and mental bias I was contemplative, and needed as much as any creature I know to have space and quiet for the maturing of my thought. So that at times a passion and craze of longing came over me, as though solitariness were a dram, and I the drunken fellow in a fever to take it. And the feeling would increase until the glory of the skies became a mockery, and the very woods a phantom evasion, and all the earth a scene beheld through the barred and dusty pane of a prison window. In such moods silence locked my tongue, and darkness—a felt cloud—hung about my face, and could I have spoken, the thought of my heart would have escaped in a cry like the Psalmist's who longed for the "wings of a dove."



For my anguish came to be strangely compounded of a desire to be far away and at rest, and a desire for activity and the jangle of a world in my ears.

Yet, whatever my mood, did my eyes but fall on the saint-like face of my wife, than the man in me throttled the movement for speech ere it reached my tongue. How could I, a great fellow, strike, even with a word, this enfeebled creature? How could I, for a moment, oppose my desires to the need of this woman for my care and tenderness?

I have spoken of Ellinor Blakemore. I, a man in prison, had the visitations of this beautiful fire-fly in my night of gloom. And the presence of Ellinor came at last to be for me a substitute for the solitariness I craved; to be almost representative of solitude itself. I do not know by what power she created this consoling illusion, this momentary relief, this cooling dream of being alone. It was not merely that someone interposed between Ida and myself, that another ear caught that low

ripple of talk, and another tongue made appropriate response, but that, in her presence, I crept out of my cramped position into space, and in her remarks found something that bore my thoughts with them, and carried them far away, as though her speech formed itself into the "wings" of my desire, and lifted me, for a season, beyond.

My wife welcomed the visits of Ellinor, and this was to my great good fortune. For hitherto, since her seizure, an attempt to introduce friends into the home-circle had been followed by disastrous effects, seeming to throw her into a condition of dangerous collapse. The only callers she could bear were those who came upon affairs of the soul, "strength," as she said, "being given her to receive all who came on God's errands." So that our enforced seclusion was terribly complete.

Ellinor, who came upon no errand save that of her own free goodness of heart and will, was the single exception. And in due course, I came to love this beautiful girl, and to desire

forever her presence about me ; so that, under her unconscious influence, I woke up to the discovery for the first time of what it is in a creature of full vitality to love with passion rather than sentiment or the faint attractions of the fancy, and to be stirred to the remotest fibres of the heart with unchangeable devotion. Thus was there added to my life in that season what I pronounce to be my only and unquenchable passion—a passion which from the beginning I knew to be hopeless, but which yet I chose and drew towards myself with absolute consent and matured resolution. And at nights, when Ida's low-voiced talk was hushed, I woke to a solitariness painful as my lack of it, and watered my pillow with the slow great tears of the pain and longing of one being for the other of his choice, and recalled the bright looks of her face, and her brave sweet ways, and the this and that of her unstudied remarks. And often in the dear intimacy of the imagination, which rifles that which is locked from it behind the barriers of day, would I draw within

my lips her name, and shape silently on my tongue the syllables of it.

I loved Ellinor Blakemore. But having said it, let no one dream that this incomparable love was ever linked in my most retired fancy with lawlessness or the savagery that lingers in men's breasts. It wore for her its white and cloistered dress, and bent its head beneath the thorns wherewith circumstance had crowned it, nor did the heart of it beat less strongly and constantly because that, too, was pierced.

I loved Ellinor Blakemore ; but this story is not the story of that love. My love for her is not the pith and core of my tragical experience. This love of mine for Ellinor goes, like a beautiful sombre-rayed joy, in and out amongst the monstrous facts of my life, winnowing and sweetening the air.

Her story was simple and clear as a child's. She was an orphan, and rented a small cottage on the ridge beyond the links, at five shillings a week, from the old woman who lived with her and tended her. Every week-day until

noon she was absent on a teaching engagement in the neighbourhood ; in the afternoon she was engaged in literary work, which sometimes took her away to London for the week-end ; but on every disengaged evening, certain as the light, she came to us.

I do not know if she was a good woman ; I am sure she would have fitted into no convention. Probably she was *not* "good." Her sympathy with failure, sorrow, and wreck was too deep, her tolerance for average imperfection too catholic. But she stood to me for goodness. She was one who sharpened "the countenance of" her "friend," and the best of my thought and my speech loosened itself in her presence.

Her nature was of that resilient, healthy quality that one associates with the manner of growth in heather and the whortleberry plant. I never questioned whether she was good or not. She went everywhere, partook of everything, read anything, and, where she was, there she created goodness in others. I

can give no account of her views, either of conduct or religion ; I did not gather that she possessed a code ; but I remember her revealing remarks. I did not presume to understand her ; but when her tender grey eyes rested on mine, my heart was soothed with the conviction that she understood others.

Ida accepted her in the same way that she accepted my reading of anybody's works aloud. She was amused, without having her fixed mental circle hit or disturbed ; the free and unconventional remarks she gently met by texts ; the fiery and untrammelled moments (for these came at last) by prayer.

Mary was affected by Ellinor much as I was. It was better for us all that she was there, for Mary and I were ill at ease one with the other. Her eyes day by day slid away from the look in mine, and the natural taciturnity hardened over her until it became something from which it was impossible to strike off words. Ellinor succeeded with her best.

Thus ran the daily life for ten long arid

years of time. Three events only stand out in the recital of my rotting experience as landmarks.

This was the first. I returned one day from the school wet through, and, since Ida disliked marks on the carpet, went in by the back part of the house. Though wet, it was not cold, and the door stood open. I entered the more quietly in that the soles of my boots were sodden, and I sat down to remove them. There was the sound of washing crockery in the kitchen and of voices. One was Ellinor's, the other Mary's. Having no thought but of household talk between women, I listened idly as I undid my laces ; indeed, from my position, I could not choose but hear.

“ Have you noticed it, Mary ? ”

“ Aye, lass, and with a heart too sore for speech.”

“ A great man, you say, with his head to the rafters ? ”

“ Aye, lass.”

“ But he stoops now.”

“Aye, lass.”

“And a sort of an uplooking glance, you said?”

“Aye, lass. An ee as free as a hawk’s.”

“It is dull and downcast now.”

“Worse than that, lass.”

“And dark hair, you said?”

“T’ raven’s wing, lass.”

“Now it is grey.”

“Aye, lass, grey before its time.”

“And a smile, Mary?”

“One t’ draw all the love out o’ a woman’s heart.”

“And a springing step?”

“Aye; that’s so, lass. And gradely movements. And a laugh and a word as easy as a song.”

“Mary!”

“Weel, lass?”

“Where—*where* has it all gone?”

How can I describe the long-drawn breath between the words, the piercing sorrow of the voice? My hands were trembling now, and I

began to replace my boots on my feet. It was possible—was it possible—that the two women spoke of me?

“It lies just here in my memory, lass.”

“The pity of it! The pity of it!”

“’Tis so my heart says, day in, day out.”

“And *then* he was four-and-twenty?”

“And *now* he is thirty, lass.”

“With his broken look, Mary, I thought him forty.”

“Aye; life has mowed the flowers in yon bonny field.”

I had my boots on again, and crept out the way I came. Yes, certainly, the broken old man of thirty that they spoke about must be myself.

One Saturday, shortly after that, when the day was brilliantly fine, Ellinor arrived earlier than usual. I remember the opening of the door, and how it seemed that Paradise came in with her. She nodded to me, and walked up to Ida, looking down at her with her bright, rallying face, and she announced a plan. It

was that all of us, including Mary, should come up to the woods and take tea there. Ida, who disliked the slightest variation in the invalid routine of existence, met her with objections, but she would take none. And Mary falling in as an ally, the expedition was arranged, Ida submitting in patient resignation. The legend tells us how Iscariot, being in hell, is taken thence once in many years to slake his thirst and cool his fever. I was as he that day. How Ellinor brought it about I do not know, but Ida consented to be left with Mary, sitting under the trees in the bath-chair, and Ellinor and I walked away together.

At first in silence. Having gone a little way I lingered, and glanced about me. Was it true that I stood out of range of the sight of the bath-chair? Was I indeed in the woods, without the atmosphere of the sick-room, its musk, its pillows, close beside me? God forgive me! God forgive me! When I found I could no longer see or hear my wife I could have wept tears of extravagant joy. I took

my hat off, and lifted my head, and gazed into the green tracery of the foliage, and heard, uninterrupted, the rustling of the breeze through the leaves, and the quiet song of a starling trying its notes. Then I lifted up my arms as well as my face—lifted them up to the lofty solitude of the pines, and the over-arching skies, and the peace of the loneliness of the earth. Ellinor was with me, it is true. Ah! so were the birds, and the flowers, and the sunshine. Ellinor was the heart of the solitude, its mystery, its depth. I knew, to be sure, that something human was near me—something that could love the man, and not merely the love of the man—something before which I had not to hide anything, but might stand as I was, with my thoughts open.

“Ellinor!”

It was Paradise, and I forgot any name but that.

She was by my side, allowing her garments so slightly to touch the sleeve of mine as to enrich the moment, but not spoil it.

"Stephen!"

I moved my hand over the landscape.

"All this," said I. "All this! This greatness and beauty, and this silence! Is it earth?"

"Just earth."

"How happy human beings are!"

"Yes."

"Do they come here often? Do they stand under the trees—free—like this?"

"Something like this. You and I—we are just two babes in the wood."

So she shook me from my mood. I looked at her face. The teeth flashed between her eloquent lips, and her eyes gave me ungrudgingly of their human sympathy. Beautiful, temperate, nature, with the possibility of passion behind!

"Two babes in the wood," said I, and laughed too.

"There is a green slope further on. Since we are two children we might run down hand in hand."

“Run!” said I.

“Of course,” said she. “Come; catch me if you can.”

And the light figure bounded away, the face still turned with its bright, sweet look towards me. Youth came back to me in the moment, and I, too, ran. With little bursts of laughter, and quick feints of movement, she, graceful as a doe, darted hither and thither from path to path, and bush to bush, while my great steps crashed behind her, until we came to the top of the green slope. Then, and not till then, she was caught. My arms seemed to hold within them the whole transfused joy of the day bodily for a moment, and then it was outside them again quick as thought, only the lithe hand grasped mine, and pulled me along to the edge of the slope, and down that as two children might run,—the scared glad faces carried willy-nilly downwards by the swift feet. The bottom being reached we sat there panting. Ellinor gathered a dock leaf from the ditch and fanned her

beautiful face. Our talk was mere babble, of how we had nearly fallen there, of how I had almost gone too fast for her at one point, and how I was sorry, but could not help myself. The sight of her feet peeping from the skirt of her grey dress made me smile.

"Why do you laugh?"

"You wear such absurd boots—such tiny boots."

"They serve for running."

"And I ran—I ran, too!" and then the grip of my sadness had me again. "I, the poor beast, who sold his birthright," I added.

"Hush!" said she.

"No; let me speak. In the beginning of my life was a misconception, a stumble by the way. I am brought to a place that I do not understand; and God has changed me. Yet to regret is the cruellest wrong of all."

"It is possible not to regret."

"I myself gathered the burden I carry."

"It is possible to accept. There is a written story," said she, "and one's self and one's

errors are part of it, and head one of the chapters."

"That," said I, "is to look deep indeed."


"*'O, Crito,'*" said she, and her voice was music, "*'if so it seem good to the gods, so let it be.'*"

Even the few veiled words were too many—too dangerous; and we were silent again. And so it came to an end, the child-like, blessed hour. Play-time was over, and we were recalled. Nor did it happen like this again. I found my wife terrified and depressed by my absence, and reproaching herself gently for her fears and collapse.

"If I could have more faith in God," said she. "But I am so weak without your presence. I am so used to it, that without it I can hardly breathe. I hope God is not angry at my fears."

The next event was the encounter of an old acquaintance. It was a damp, cold day, and, instead of pushing the bath-chair into the woods, I was wheeling it along the highroad.

Ida, by the aid of pillows, shawls, and hot-bottles, was comfortable enough, and the air was essential to her. We had just reached one of the steep, stiff hills of the country, at the top of which the atmosphere is purer and more exhilarating than below ; and she had just asked to be taken there, when I heard steps and voices behind me. Two men came alongside ; one, a flashily-dressed fellow of some pretensions to good birth, bore the professional scoundrel on every line of his face ; the other, of obviously humble extraction, was dressed as a groom ; and in the handsome but dissipated face I recognised Peter Labrum. Something of the old Devon accent lingered in his speech, which was otherwise overladen by cockney, and, noting it, I had the instant of preparation before he came up, which enabled me to catch the face of the lad of nineteen through that of the man of forty. As they came alongside, both men turned and stared curiously at my wife, and then mockingly at myself ; and the one, thrusting his



tongue in his cheek, winked his derision at Peter, who, however, going with the sullen scowl which I also remembered, did not respond.

Me he did not recognise ; but when his eyes touched mine, drunkard and surly though he was, my heart rushed out to the man of Devon, and over my memory came the salt freshness of the sea and the freedom of the waves, and then of the fisher's net, and the dreams and fantasies of my youth ; where-upon a choking passion of desire seized me, and, like one mad, I left my position behind the bath-chair and took a step or two after him, having it in my disordered fancy to cry upon him to return.

“Ahoy, Pete ! ahoy ! Here is the fisher of men, little Steve Whapshare ! Ahoy, Pete ! let me into your boat. Wherever it is bound, I will go with you. Carry me back to the free salt sea and the smell of fish and tar, and over the swell of the waves, and down amidst the breakers ! For God's sake, let me go with you, Pete, even to a drowning !”

“Stephen !”

I stopped. I had not cried out. There was my wife's face looking at me from between the wraps and the pillows—chiselled, precise, pink and white and plump, with a shade of reproachful displeasure in her eyes. My own, I think, were wild.

“Stephen !”

The distressful gentleness of the tones—the gentleness which did not heal and bless, but which wove a delicate network of prisoning fetters about my will—arrested me.

“I beg you not to attack them,” said she, firmly. “They derided my affliction, but already I am praying to God to forgive them. My cup is bitter, but it is of God's ordaining ; and He helps me to drink it patiently.”

I went back to my wonted position, and I pushed her up the hill. All the time Ida prayed and talked in that low, sweet voice of hers.

“I can return thanks to God that He singles me out for this suffering,” said she.

From my great chest broke audible breaths, but I discovered no words by which to express and relieve myself. I got up to the top of the hill without speech, but it was neither the burden nor the effort that brought the drops of sweat out on my face, and made me tremble from head to foot.

"Oh, Steve, dear!" cried Ida, when she saw the thunders on my brow; "forgive them. *I can forgive!*"

I stood back a little, folding my arms so that she might not be disturbed by the look in my eyes.

The sea! the sea! My God! The sea! the sea!

The third event revealed to me the slow and unsuspected movement of my mind towards a wrecked faith.

It was summer again. Each summer was the same. There was neither change nor release—save for Ellinor. Time must have moved, for Ida was stronger in health, and more dependent than ever in habit. Even

Ellinor could not win such another hour as the one I have described. She kept about us day by day, however, and many a half-hour would she unostentatiously steal from my wife, and give it back to myself.

As I say, the summer was there again, and I had got the bath-chair up to the woods. I sat on the ground in the shadow of it, out of sight of my wife. I had been reading aloud, and that which she had chosen to hear was a sonnet of Milton's—her choice in literature being refined, and, in its way, sound.

“‘They also serve who only stand and wait!’”

she repeated, as my voice ceased. “Oh, Stephen! How appropriate that is to my case!”

I knew by the slight rustle of her garment that she had folded her hands and bowed her head, with the meek, resigned look that was common to her. And while I, with my growing and stupefied habit of dumbness, sat silent, I suddenly perceived a stoat creep from between the bushes, and seize a young squirrel.

The squirrel was strong, and there ensued a deadly struggle. I watched the fight between the two creatures to the end, and did not stir to help the weaker.

"The strongest is the fittest to swim," went my thought.

Yet I did not suppose I said anything true. My faculties were dulled, and I stared at things from a dreadful apparent apathy that overlaid my inward pain. I watched to the end, and the squirrel perished ; the stoat slunk away with it into the underwood. Then I shut up the book on my knee.

"I am thinking," said Ida's low voice, "of the inscrutable wisdom, and the great mercy of God, who has brought me through such suffering in order to give me of His peace."

I did not reply. I had a thought of my own. It was wonderfully clear, sudden, and vivid.

"Perhaps," said my mind, to that great and horrible over-shadowing mind, which so far I had called God, "perhaps I do not believe in you at all."

The words seemed to pass out of me, and to go wandering on and on, and to drop down and down. Being so shorn of the natural activity of a man, the powers of my fancy were increased, and I saw Time in great empty spaces, and my own thought winging its way across them, carrying destiny under its wings. And then there sprang up a wondrous arch, and stretched and stretched across those immeasurable spaces, and one foot of the arch rose from the underwood, where the stoat sucked the blood of the squirrel, and the other foot of the arch was planted in the breast of Him who lurks in darkness and remoteness.

"Oh, Steve, dear!" said Ida's low, gentle voice, "*do* take me home. When you don't answer I get frightened. Say something beautiful and comforting to me, dear! The day has no cheerfulness in it unless you make it."

So I got up and placed myself as I was wont behind the bath-chair. And my heart smote me that I had been surly and taciturn; yet I found no words.



CHAPTER X.

THUS during ten years of time was my nature broken under small and imperceptibly accumulating degrees of pain, of which the sum amounted to a great torture. Yet could I not find it in my heart or in my intellectual choice to abandon the creature to whom I had linked myself in the unconsidered choice of youth. By that act my conscience, I thought, told me I had to abide.

On occasion, in the night seasons, I had maddening accesses of self-questioning, when I wondered, was this baulking of my life the effect of my own lack of will, or did it lie entirely in circumstance? But when the day rose, the question merged itself in immediate obligation. Thus time ebbed away and youth with it ; the

best of my years being tortured from me in slow despair, while day by day I rose to my duty of dragging my burden up hill and down dale, and of listening to that perpetual chatter of a soul's advance that never changed. And never did I trace throughout those years upon my wife's part, one hint of understanding of the asphyxiating influence on her companion soul, of the gradual ruin that went on in me !

The torture was, as I say, an accumulating one. The occasional inbreaks of life upon the deathly routine would shake the unused manhood in me, and produce a sense of tumult by that which was the ordinary occurrence of a day to others ; and as the years neared to a close, I was conscious, at times, of a bubbling of frenzy through my brain, as though, like blind Samson, the moment might come when my strong hands would go feeling out after the pillars upon which this house of my misery was founded, and bending myself between them in supreme defiance, I should crash it down upon myself and others. I feared especially the


night, when the numbness that usually prevailed during the day-time turned to a lively and most incredible torment, when thought, desires, and ambitions serried through my mind, each one in exaggerated force, and each one attacking the fortress of my endurance, within which my failing yet resolute manhood stood on guard.

I was conscious that these night frenzies of the will were on the increase, and because I dared confide them to none, they began to terrify my imagination, as though some monstrous disaster were presaged by them—a disaster whose nature was entirely formless, yet ever present, to my mind.

A whim of Ida's brought me relief. The room in which she usually spent her days opened from the large bed-chamber. She would often lie awake at nights in pain and weariness, murmuring hymns and prayers to herself, and at times found sleep only under the influence of soporifics; and she took the fancy that to have a small couch prepared in

the sitting-room would bring her better rest. Mary fell into the plan at once, and made the alteration required. The door between the two chambers was closed or open according to Ida's wish, but the change to me was a deep relief, and the horror of my nights was lessened.

Ten years neared to a close, and upon the horizon of my life no little cloud of hope, even of "the size of a man's hand," arose. I was now a man of thirty-four, Ida was thirty-three, and Ellinor, I should suppose, on the bright side of thirty. She still kept with us, and by and bye I recognised that she was there for me, that her days and hours were poured out to help mine, and that this bright and noble girl was striving to supply in her own person something of that which my existence lacked. 'T was she who kept a sound spot within my rotting life, she who sustained me by her beautiful sanity; and yet I grudged it, for, as the days went on, I noted that the rainbow gladness of her face was shadowed, and that the tenderness of her eyes had taken a companion sadness.



Love, if love came to her at all, was born of a mourning mother, and all its fiery shafts were wet and dimmed with tears.

She and I had scarcely an opportunity for speech alone. Our intercourse was by the eyes, the deep heart sympathy, the inner meaning of phrases apparently casual. How surcharged to bursting was my heart with unuttered speech! How did the moody silence of my tongue cover a passion of unexpressed feeling and experience! But it was the nature of my trouble that to none could I confide it; I was bound to silence upon it. And I was more bound to this before the beautiful presence of Ellinor than another.

Once, however, speech did come, breaking like the miraculous stream from the arid rock of circumstance. I returned home from the daily work of my school—the portion of the day which interested me, and over which I lingered gladly—and through the quiet warmth of a July afternoon trod the beaten path towards home. I walked slowly, grudgingly. Too

soon I reached the cottage and the small enclosure. There was about me instantly its hush and peace, the lulled quiescence too deep for bearing ; but as I neared the study window there was also the murmur of voices. I gathered that Ida had been carried downstairs, and that Ellinor was with her. That gave me respite. I drew back between the study window and the door, leaning against the house wall instead of entering. The voice was that of a reader ; I could not catch the words, but presently the reading stopped, and I heard the idle rustling of the leaves of the book. After that my wife spoke.

“Thank you, Ellinor ; but if you read any more I think my head would ache.”

“Does it ache now ?”

“Just a little, dear. There’s just a muzzy feeling.”

“Ida !”—Ellinor’s voice was crisp and severe—“you’ve no business to have a headache when I’m reading Hazlitt to you.”

“Oh, Ellinor !”

"Do not speak in that hurt tone. I presume you'd rather not have headaches?"

"It does not depend on my wishes."

And my wife sighed.

"Nor on my will," she added in a rather grave tone.

"Are you resigned to them?"

"Yes, Ellinor. Or rather I try to be."

"I suppose you think God sends them to you?"

"How can you ask? Yes, I do think so."

There was a long pause. I was not in the least interested. This sort of talk was dull as the fall of raindrops after six weeks' wet weather. I took some pleasure in hearing Ellinor's voice, but otherwise I did not care to listen. What I wished was that the talk should go on, and that thus I might remain hidden where I was—at rest for the moment in the sun against the house wall, my own thoughts going as I would. But the next sentence startled me into spell-bound and amazed attention.

"Ida,"—and now Ellinor's voice had a low,

tense tone, as though something within her were scarcely under command—"Ida, if I were you I would either recover or kill myself."

At that my heart gave a great leap and stood still.

"Oh, Ellinor, dear!"

She—my wife—spoke in gentlest reproof.

"For your husband's sake—"

"Yes, dear, it is for his sake I try to keep alive."

There came upon that a long pause.

"That is not what I mean. I did not mean that at all. It is not in the least what I was going to say."

Ellinor's voice was very low and firm.

"What, then, did you mean?"

"What I mean is that to go on living a life such as yours involves too much for it to be worth while."

"God gives me strength to bear it, dear. He even sends me peace."

"I am not thinking of—*you*. What I mean is that it involves too much to—*others*. Ida,

if I were in your place, I could not, and I *would* not, bear it!"

Passion of feeling made the voice as a rich chord, smitten by a strong hand.

"I don't understand you, dear. I have to bear it. I console myself by trying to put on patience and-resignation as a daily dress."

"Resign yourself? Suppose you *did n't* resign yourself! Suppose you woke up! Suppose you exercised your will, your protest—threw back your indignant resolve, your defiance to Heaven! Ida, if I were in your place, I should do that. I would *not* bear it. I would kill myself. Why don't you?"

"Oh, Ellinor, what can you mean? Defiance to Heaven! Is the thought of God nothing?"

"What is God?"

"Ellinor!"

"Yes, what is God?"

"You ask me what God is? You and I can never be friends if you do not know that."

"You have a husband!"

"Ah, yes! My angel! My Stephen!"

"I do not know God; but I know your husband. He is no angel."

"Will you speak ill of Stephen to my face?"

"Neither to your face nor behind your back. But I will speak of him as he is. He is no angel; he is a man. And I see that your constant sacrifice of him to God is horrible torment to him—*horrible torment!* I know nothing of God. But Stephen Whapshare I know; and I can imagine love and a husband. And—no, I *could* not bear myself!"

I heard her stamp her foot. I knew now she was standing.

"Love and a husband!" cried my wife. "Oh, you are cruel to touch on that! Don't I see the daily sorrow he endures for my sake? Don't I see the grief which the spectacle of my suffering causes him? But I am in God's hands."

"Ida, I long to shake you!"

"Oh, Ellinor, dear, you look so strange; you alarm me. Don't—don't attack me. I can hardly bear a touch. *Please!* Remember I can't retaliate."

"Not retaliate?" Ellinor burst into a wild laugh. "My God! not retaliate! No, I won't attack you, Ida. My wrists, though small, are strong, and—you, *poor* thing!—I won't use them on you. *You*, no doubt, are very safe 'in God's hands.' Ah!"—she drew a long breath, and her tone softened from that trembling fire of generous rage to tenderness—"but I would be in my own; and I would take my husband's life into my own hands, too."

Upon that, the voices ceased, but I heard Ellinor's tread going to and fro in the room, and I heard the low whisper of Ida's continual prayers, cut by the sharp decision of Ellinor's footfall.

"You are going?" asked my wife presently in a faint voice.

"Yes."

"But kiss me as usual, Ellinor. Indeed I

bear no grudge. I shall pray to God for you to know Him. It is all an invalid can do."

"No!" flung out Ellinor's voice in vigorous command. "Don't mind troubling God with that prayer. As for forgiveness and not bearing a grudge—remember, *I* don't forgive *you*, nor ever shall. And somehow, after to-day, I can't kiss you. Truth lies between us at last."

Now, all this time, while the woman's tragedy went on, I, the man, had leaned against the side of the house, with thumping heart, and singing ears, and shaking knees, all mazed and whirled about by the words I had heard, by the sudden bursting upon my deadened existence of such a troubled wave of life. And, now that it was over, Ellinor would come out of the door near me and see me thus, my sick head fallen to my breast, and my limbs quaking. I was all distraught, and could not make up my mind whether to escape, or whether to pull myself to an erect bearing and enter the house. My power of will and of decision had gone from me, therefore I remained as I was, shivering

and pale ; and she, passing out of the door, came on me face to face. For one moment I saw her countenance, passion-filled, the eyes with a lovely perturbation in them, and the earnest mouth saddened and closed, and then the consciousness of my presence leapt into it, and, finally, the knowledge that I must have overheard, whereat the colour fled from her cheek, and her mouth quivered, and the lids sank over her gray eyes.

What I saw in her face was but a reflection of the wild and haggard misery in my own.

Then again she caught at her self-mastery, and, with vigorous decision, beckoned me with her hand, and walked onward. I heard Ida murmuring and praying within, and compunction at leaving this helpless creature whom I had wedded for even so long, withheld me from movement. Ellinor turned and earnestly beckoned me again, whereat I stole after her along the grass with noiseless footsteps, lest my wife should learn my presence, and be troubled at my withdrawal.



CHAPTER XI.

WE walked some distance, Ellinor leading, and I following after. She went over the golf links and up to the ridge, pausing at a point where the ground sank sheer before us, and where a group of shaggy fir-trees, torn by the wind, clung with naked roots to the soil. Amongst them was a holly-tree with a long slender trunk, licked silvery white by the weather and bearing some remnant of its old grace in a few branches covered with dark, glossy leaves at the top. A bank of grey clouds, heavy with rain, hung over the horizon, the crests of the fir-trees shooting out darkly against them ; at the foot of the clouds—for so heavy were they that they seemed to stand upon the horizon—streaks of mist sluggishly

came up in phantom processions. The winds lay torpid amongst them.

Here Ellinor paused, and I came up alongside, and stood opposite. Then I saw that her eyes were downcast, and her face serious and mild.

"You heard?" said she.

"That is so," said I. "Nor can I accuse myself, having had no power to withdraw."

"I ask no apology," said she. "Fate sends such things."

"It is Fate," said I, and my eyes were again upon the ground.

"But," said she firmly and gently, "there is one thing in life you *shall* not lose—something that words can give, that I will give you. I love you, Stephen." And as she spoke, she lifted up her hand with a slow and solemn movement.

I took my hat off when she spoke, and, looking on her, I saw that the grey eyes Mary had taught me to trust, shone with a wonderful light.

"Thank you," said I gently, "thank you,

Ellinor, for that love. If you had not loved me I had perished."

I paused, my eyes again downcast. And then one of those cramping bonds that enmeshed my spirit loosened within me. I had not forgotten Ida ; but I took no notice of the thought.

"And as a man loves just once in his life, so do I love you, Ellinor !" I cried. "I could not choose but love you."

"Is not that joy ?" asked she.

"No," said I, moving my head sadly ; "it is not joy. My heart is a walled place where grief lies, and round about runs my passion for you, striving to enter, and to bring help and consolation. But it falls back defeated, wounded. It cannot enter in."

"Tell me the grief. Speak to one who loves you."

"The weight of slow years lies over it. It is hard to bring up a word from those hellish bottoms."

"Stephen !"

"Yes? My beloved!"

"I told you *my* grief."

"Ah! beautiful child! You, a whole, unfettered creature, may reveal your heart. If you have joy or pain, you may let it flow in words, or you may give it away in deeds. It is not so with me. In that walled place I told you of lies a trapped bird, and if I speak I feel the wrenching of its wings. I dare not speak. Ellinor, it is a man's whole manhood that lies there broken!"

I shook as my words fell. To speak was an unloosening of bonds; and the unloosening was terrible. I stretched myself to my full height, and stood with heaving chest and clenched hands and quivering nostrils, my bare head thrown back.

She gently extended her arms, her eyes shining with the same wonderful light, and as David before Saul, tuned her voice to master me by love and melody.

"You called me something just now. Say it again!"

“Ellinor, my beloved!”

“Round all these dark horizons runs light,” said she, moving her hands about her, and then she brought them to her breast. “Stephen, my beloved!” she answered me.

Watching her, pale in her passion, with the light in her eyes, the grief within me was not so monstrous.

“We might be two spirits,” I murmured, “standing here. Two disembodied things who could take the wings of the morning.”

She stood waiting and watching.

“All that is essential is here. This earth, the strength of a man, the love of a woman. No more than this, but how much that is! For it is all we need.”

Still she was silent.

“In thought,” I said, “we have power to move to our inheritance and take possession. We are free in thought to be where and how we would. And what’s to hinder?”

She gave no answer.

“So,” I said, “we are spirits, and thus we

meet together. But"—and my voice became raised and stern—"we are on the earth—on it, but not of it. We, who know not what we are, we, the children of mystery and darkness, are on earth, and call ourselves men and women. And that is to be in bondage."

"Stephen!"

The cry burst from her lips. And I answered it by a sigh. And what a sigh was there!

"You and I are truants from school," I gently said; "let us go back. These woods and fields are beautiful and wild. But we belong to routine."

"Stephen!"

"Hush!" said I, as mildly as I could. "You do not know what sleeping dogs you stir. Beware!"

I looked up to the sky; I lifted my hand, fearing to feel the frenzy upon me again. I inexpressibly feared I knew not what.

"As I am a man!" I murmured, with my hand uplifted.

The girl sprang suddenly forwards, and fell

on her knees at my feet, clasping my hands and pressing them against her breast, while, all distraught and wild, she gazed upon my face.

"I am—*afraid* to let you go," said she.

I looked down on her sadly.

"Afraid?" I repeated.

"*Afraid*. The love in me fears something. Yes! I am afraid. But we have found this hour. Do not let us lose it. It is a loop-hole. Let us make it an open gate. Stephen! let us run through."

I mutely shook my head.

"Yes," said she; "listen to me. *Come!*"

"The maimed thing lying down there below," said I briefly.

"You have sacrificed enough," said she in a low voice, her features tense; "and that to no end. You must sacrifice no more."

"It may be," said I, "that my eyes are dim. I do not see the door you speak of."

"They are dim. But my eyes see! My eyes of love!"

"I may sacrifice myself, but not another—not *others*."

"Who are those—*others*—you speak of?" cried she, with proud lips. "And what God gave you leave to sacrifice yourself?"

"I know nothing of God."

"Stephen," said Ellinor, with an impassioned earnestness that startled me, "I am pleading for myself—*perhaps*. I do not know. But I am sure that I plead for *you*. Not in vain do I love you; not in vain has this sad, impossible passion been born into my heart. It is there for *you*, not for myself. The Best in all the Universe brought it to be there. It lends me wisdom—for *you*. Look here in my face. Is there no truth there, no tenderness? I am *afraid* to let you go. Here where the love is, there is your safety and refuge! Here with me those walls you spoke of will melt away, the trapped bird will escape. Here in my breast I keep your manhood, whole and unbroken. I bring it back to you. I think that I am sent, Stephen. The Best in the

Universe sent me to you. Look in my face and see if it is there! It may be I am God's angel. If so, I bid you come with me."

"I see God nowhere," said I, briefly and sternly.

"Then look on love."

"Yes," said I, "I see love in one place: I see it in your one face."

"That," said she, "is the sign I accept. All else I break. I will be strong for you. The old I cast away. I will take a new resolution, a new conscience and will. Do not go back. Leave 'the things that are behind,' and with me pass on to the new. The earth, the strength of a man, the love of a woman—no more than this, yet all we need!"

"It may be I said that."

"And I heard it. Follow me now."

"Alas! poor woman," said I.

A sob fluttered in her throat; but her brave lips smiled.

"Alas! poor man," said she.

"Loose my hands, Ellinor. They lie in Paradise."

She pressed them closer.

"In Paradise they remain."

"If I see a gate, I also see one with a drawn sword guarding it."

"I win the gate, and I fear no sword," said she.

"Will it not pierce you?"

"Then let it stab. That way the fear does not lie. I fear," she said, "the *narrow* way, and your feet creeping down it."

"Why should you fear?"

"I cannot tell. Something in your eyes and brows, my Stephen!"

"What is there?"

"A shadow lies on them."

"Shadow enough," said I.

And then I leaned down a little, and gazed into her eyes. And she lent them to me that I might learn the look in them by heart; and all the time my passion ran hither and thither about that fortress in my heart, striving to break away; and no way was broken.

So I raised myself again; and then I moved

my hands,—which were new to me, strange and beautiful from her touch,—and turned them so that I grasped hers ; and I lifted her up, and, for love's sake, caught her to my breast, tasting heaven for a moment ; and then, for love's sake, I put her aside.

“ Bear with me a while, Ellinor,” said I. “ There is a dullness in my heart. I cannot see other than I do see. It may be that the mainspring of my will is clogged.”

Thus I rejected the wisdom of the woman who loved me, fearing the bright gift she offered. Yet on my side was also the purging power of love, and this suspension of action was something in the light so lent. Reverence and compassion alike deterred me. The fibres of so small a motive as the accustomed run deeper than we know. I read the world but as I knew it, and obligation as I saw it,—stupidly, as a man, may be, and not with the woman's swift, illumined intuition ; and if in consequence I damned my soul, yet to have so hesitated was my single grace.

A mist was in my eyes, and through it I saw her standing before me, mild, sorrowful, and composed. She asked no more, nor gave a sign of her own heart's despair, but turned from me with patient dignity. The way to her home lay in one direction, the way to mine in another.

I stood and watched, desiring to follow her with my eyes until I lost sight of her over the bend of the hill. But a wind came up, and the bank of cloud broke, and showers of rain swept up between, and took the sight of her from me. Then I, too, turned to go. A dullness fell upon me, and feeling itself sank down before the numb habit of my misery. Yet was there something new and inexplicable. The way of my life, which had hitherto stretched on and on before my wearied eyes, had vanished. My mind, sick with the constant apprehension of it, found it there no more ; it was cut sheer off. Instead rose before me a curtain of shadows. There was an edge of something, and this black mist hovered over it. In vain my mind ran on and peered. I was as though one walking in

darkness might learn that the pit lay before him, and learn no more.

I went on, with desperate, sullen steps, until out of sheer habit I reached the fenced enclosure and my cottage. Mary stood at the door. At the sight of my face she came forward into the rain.

“Lad,” said she, “lad!”

Not once since the fatal night of the elopement had she named me by the endearing, familiar term before.

Ida called from her sitting-room upstairs a plaintive, anxious greeting :

“Where have you been? Oh, Steve, darling! Why have you left me so long?”

I stifled the groan in my heart.

After the storm of rain the weather became sultry and breathless. The sun did not shine, yet no rain fell. The nights were close, and an intolerable depression hung in the air. If I slept, I saw always the same formless shadow before me, and ever was I startled from sleep by hearing the sharp closing of a door.

And Ellinor came no more.

During those few days I spoke little ; I spoke only when obliged, and each word—were it but thanks or request—seemed to hurt me. Mary was more taciturn than ever, yet my few moments of relief were those I stole in the kitchen, escaping thus from the “continuity of words” in the sitting-room.

“Lad,” Mary would say, “lad !”

Her expressiveness got no further, and her silence was a refuge for my spirit.

Ida had not mentioned Ellinor. On the third evening she spoke of her. I had returned from the school—even the school-work sank during these days into mechanism and monotony—and I went upstairs to the sitting-room. And by the “sitting-room” I mean that room next my bedroom which my wife now occupied by night as well as by day.

Ida lay on the couch under the windows. The faint blue of the curtains threw soft shadows over her complexion, but not the most skilful arrangement of colour could hide the

changes wrought by the march of years such as hers. The tints had coarsened, and the cheeks were too full. The fleshiness appalled me at times. Then, too, the linear refinement had altered, the chiselled decorum had become mere precision, the delicacy, fixity of expression; rigidity had plucked at the too plump outline, and tucked it in here and there into something pursed-up and relentlessly narrow. It was a countenance before which the mind closed itself, and the fountains of speech dried up.

As I opened the door I heard her whispering to herself as was her wont. When I came in, she turned to me with a smile wetted by tears.

"Steve," said she, "come and sit by my side."

And that I did.

"Is the bath-chair ready?" asked she.

"Yes," said I; "I have come to carry you down."

"Are the cushions in it?"

"Yes ; and the wrap. Just as usual."

"Thank you, Steve. How beautiful your thoughtfulness for me is ! My own husband !"

"Will you come ?"

"Wait a little, Steve. I want to talk to you."

I had no curiosity. She would tell me that which she told me every day ; her soul and its ways were as a small, dull map before me. But because I had no curiosity, because a talk with my wife was to me so inexpressibly irksome a thing, my heart filled with compunction, and I leaned a little over the maimed thing that lay upon the sofa, wishing that I could give out to her something from that faulty loving-kindness which was mine in common with other human beings.

But Ida was not one to whom it was possible to give of human goodness. To be able to give of that common, that enriching, gift needs a quality in the recipient like to that in the donor.

I did my poor faltering best with effort.

"Have you had less pain to-day?" I asked.

"I think a little less." She sighed, and closed her lids in upon herself resignedly, and I felt the goodness in my heart shrivelling up. "I thank God when I have a little less pain. But I have had a trouble of the mind."

"Yes, Ida?"

"I feel I have done wrong, both to myself and to you, Steve, darling."

I became a little more attentive. The heart in me, lying like lead at the bottom of nowhere, stirred with a dazed and foolish hope.

"Yes?" said I, in a whisper.

"Ellinor is not coming back here."

I inclined my head.

"Steve, I feel that I yielded to temptation all along about Ellinor. I thought it would be so nice to have someone to read to me and to talk with while you were away at the school; but, Steve, God has shown me that I was wrong. In your absence, I should have been content to wait and watch for your return; I should have felt that your presence in the even-

ings—the presence of my own Steve, my husband—was enough earthly alleviation for the sorrows of my life. And for the rest, I should have contented myself with God and the consolations of His presence.”

“ ‘Ellinor is not coming back!’ ” I repeated.

“No, Ellinor is not coming back. I have fancied lately that I traced some deterioration in myself; I came to look too eagerly for her gaiety, for her idle talk and her presence. And, oh, Steve, dear, sometimes I have fancied that you take less delight in things heavenly than you did before, that you do not care as much as you used to do about the books that tell us most about God!”

“ ‘Ellinor is not coming back!’ ” my dazed lips repeated.

“No, she is not coming back. I trace this deterioration in the spiritual atmosphere of my household to her. As a faithful mistress, as God’s handmaiden here—you know, Steve, dear, what I would say. Mary has not been quite satisfactory; and I find Ellinor has lent

her novels. And her talk is not *guarded* before servants. She has strange, unusual ideas about the People, and is quite random in the way she expresses them. And she questions so much—laughs even at the Catechism. Lately Mary has declined to attend the chapel class-meeting any more. She says that chapel once a week is religion enough for her. I speak to her of the infinite riches of God and His anxiety that we should use them; but I cannot move her. Steve, I blame myself."

Again my heart stirred, this time not with hope. I said nothing. My mind repeated over and over to itself the same thing, "*Ellinor is not coming back!*"

"To-day I talked it all over with the vicar's wife. I told her my conviction of where my failure has been. I told her that nothing but complete separation from the world, and a life *hidden* in Christ, can satisfy me. And I told her that I had determined to make a sacrifice of something that had been dear to me, but

had ensnared me. And she said that God calls His own, and will reward those who deny themselves for Him. And then I told her about Ellinor, and how I no longer dared to have her near me ; for Ellinor—oh, Steve, how it shocked me !—Ellinor tells me she does not know God, and does not care to know Him.”

She broke off in tears, and covered her face with her handkerchief. I sat there, still as a stone.

“ Since Ellinor said that, I have wept and prayed night and day, beseeching the Lord Christ for her,” said Ida, when she could speak. “ You did not ask the reason for my grief.”

“ No,” said I.

“ I did not speak on my part, because from the first I did not doubt how I must act. To take one who denies my Lord into my household ! Steve, *that* would have been conscious sin. I did not know before, though I fear that my blindness may have been wilful.”

She paused again, her hand over her eyes. I did not speak.

"It was the day on which you were so strangely long in returning from school that I found out the sad truth. You have never left me so long before. I think, Steve, God *arranged* it so, that I might make my resolve by myself, unaided of you. And the next day I wrote to her. My letter was as tender as I could make it. I told her I should spend my last breath in prayer for her, but that never again—not, that is, until her heart was right with God—must she pass the threshold of my house."

Again she broke down in tears. I sat still as a statue; only my fingers twitched. And this twitching I found I could not control. As to speech, I did not think of that. It was no use to speak. Words would not pass into her mind through her ears. Though one shouted, the ears of her understanding would not hear. Presently I got up and mastered myself to gentleness.

"The bath-chair is ready, Ida," said I.
"I've got it out before the door."

"I feel a little languid after my mental struggle, my emotion," she said.

"Yes?"

"The air is sultry, too."

"Yes." Was it possible I was to have a respite.

"Open the window wider, darling. I think I will not go. I will lie here. Read to me, Steve, instead."

"Not go?"

"Not to-night. Bring a book, dearie."

"Ida, my head aches a little."

"*Your* head aches!" She smiled incredulously. "Big monster of a man. How absurd!"

"Still, it aches, and I must get a little fresh air. Moreover, there is something I ought to do. I have books for the children to order."

"Will you leave me in my trouble, Steve?"

"I will not be long, Ida, but I *must* get the books."

"Write for them, dearie."

"I must have the books by the morning. I am going. I will try and not be long."

I strode somewhat hastily to the door. Nothing could have kept me at that moment. But if there was something unusual in my manner, she did not remark it, and, for once, being pre-occupied, was less exacting in her demands upon me. She took up her Bible, and, as she opened it, murmured, with her eyes on the open page :

"Be as quick as you can, then, and I will pray for Ellinor again."

I flung down the stairs and out of the house, my steps noisy and crashing.

"Oh, Steve, Steve!" cried Ida sensitively after me.

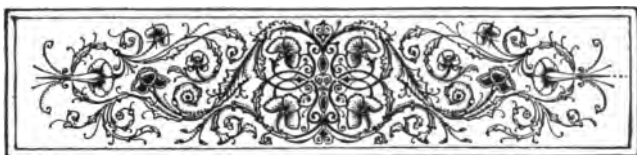
Mary ran to the house door.

"Lad," she called, "lad!"

I turned my head and gave her a wan smile. Her face was pale with apprehension, yet I know not what she apprehended. My sole thought was to escape for one brief hour alone to the woods.

But as I turned my head to throw Mary that reassuring smile, my glance took within it the bath-chair standing ready before the door, the pillows upon it, the wrap, the foot-stool, the hard little wheel in front ; and when I saw it a shuddering qualm of disgust rose up within me. And so, at a run, I made for the woods.





CHAPTER XII.

I REACHED the woods, and plunged into the heart of them, for my humour was for absolute solitude, and I would be buried and lost amongst the trees. And when I knew that a belt of them was about me upon every side, I threw myself full length on the ground, amongst the fallen leaves and pine needles, and the grasses, and small flowers, and herbs. It was a safe loneliness. In it I might lose the vigilant self-defences of behaviour, and, secure from the eye of man, be the tragic creature I was without pretence or hindrance; and so, with my face upon my arms, and the eye-bright and pimperl against my beard and my cheeks, I felt the fountain of my tears, sealed since childhood, break up within me and defy

my manhood ; so that with a great weeping I watered the ground and the little flowers about me, and with sighs and inarticulate cries loosened the wretchedness of my heart.

Then I lay still as a tired child, my forehead on my arms, my cheeks wet, and my lids closed.

But presently it happened that I, who knew not if there were a God, found myself at prayer. My prayer was not the expression of a hope ; it was the protest of despair. I was as one who has died, and for whom the concerns of this life are over, and who yet discovers a petition for this life left burning and alive within. Thus under the grave-stone the body might lie and feel the Unrealised throb and stab within.

"Set me back in life once more," I cried, to I know not what power above me, "and give me a fair chance with other men. *Give me the common conditions.* Let me be as others are, and start afresh somewhere, some when. Only let it be earth—this earth that I have not in-

herited as others have. Let me be a man without a millstone tied to my neck. Let there be room, and air, and life, for me as for others. The common conditions—no more! Let me breathe, and act, and work, and move, and think, and speak. Let me—" and suddenly I turned over on my side and sat up, stretching my arms—"let me *sin* so that this numbness be stabbed back to feeling, so that my will be no longer stifled under this death-in-life of obligation. *Let me sin!*"

I cried it out in a great and bitter cry, and the words went wandering up amongst the trees. And I sat where I was thinking of the earth that I had never inherited, but which I loved; and thinking of the faces of my fellow-men, which I had missed, but which I loved. I thought of these things with strong desire and a glowing heart. The trees and the flowers, the birds and insects, were beautiful to me—beautiful in themselves alone, as being things of earth. To the little flowers about me I cast tender glances, touching them with

my hand in gentle admiration. I loved them, and saw in them something better and greater than myself. I loved them in the beautiful solitude in which I found them. They were *themselves*, and grew as Nature would have it, looking with unhurt faces to the sky. But I—what was I? A thing so broken and inharmonious—how could I name myself? I—bent, crippled, and bound to uses not my own.

“God! How I suffer!” I cried. “God! What bonds!”

And then I prayed again, my useless, impossible, yet urgent, petition.

“Let me stand once,” I fiercely demanded, “it may be ages hence—but still let me stand once, a free man on this earth, with the story still to be told, the battle still to be fought—a *free man*. A man free from tainted air. ‘The breeze blowing over the heath,’ Brother Christ! Poverty—obscurity if you will—a fisher-lad, no more; but leave to struggle and fight, and, it may be, sin with the rest.”

So I lifted up my heart's petition on the hands of my great anguish, and in my vehemence, words being once loosened within me, prayed on and on, knowing not to what end nor what answer the prayer, rising up and up beyond the trees, would carry back to me.

Yet even now He took it, and set it by Him, answering it.

And after the last vehement words I lay still upon my back, my hands over my eyes, with nothing in my ears save the murmuring of the wind amongst the trees, and now and then the cry of a bird. I lay silent, thinking of the years of my youth spent in great mental effort to the one end, and of the dedication of myself to that end, and of the strength of my body, and the unused waste of it. So I lay, looking my agony in the face, until night fell upon me, and the stars, coming out between the branches of the trees, seemed to shine compassion down upon me.

Then the conditions of this world, such as I had known it, closed over me again ; and, feel-

ing being for the moment dulled a little, I rose and went home to my wife, and even in my dazed habit passed straight up to her room, where I found her undressed, and laid upon her bed.

“Dear,” said she, as I came in, the gloom of the woods in my face, “you have been very long. But I have felt such peace all this evening. I have been able to lie here blessing God for my affliction.”

I turned away hastily, and sought my own room, turning so hastily that I might conceal the sudden breaking over my face of something I could not repress. I trod and re-trod the bedroom floor—the door being still open between us. A swelling perturbation was driving me hither and thither, and the unconstrained agitation of the woods returned. But this disastrous night-storm of emotion must needs, as our earthly conditions will have it, be drawn within the eye of a needle, and the delicate despair of my soul be tortured with blunt thrusts from trivial things.

Urgent for space wherein to contain myself, I went to the window and threw it wide, and pushed my head out to the night. The wind had risen, and the curtains blew out beside me.

"Steve, what *are* you doing?" followed after me the plaintive voice of my wife.

"My head still aches. And"—it broke from me suddenly—"I cannot bear the smell of musk."

"Not like musk! Oh, Steve! How funny of you to say that now! I have had it all these years."

I stood shrinking by the open window. Within this narrow crib of my outward life, my limbs and muscles seemed to me monstrous in their strength and force; how could I gather back and contain myself? And then I felt something in my brain rip up, and my face changed, savagery as of primeval man leaping into it.

"Do shut the window, dear," cried Ida. "The draught pours into this room. The

curtains and the pictures are swinging about. How are my nerves to bear it? What are you doing?"

I glanced around. In the still room was an agitation and movement, a sweeping by of air. I had the fancy that the commotion of the trifles about me was the result of my own shaken mood. So that I stood watching the disturbed objects in the room, striving to re-conquer, to gather back, that fierce thing within myself which had escaped from bonds.

"Steve!" cried Ida sharply.

"I can shut the door between, Ida," said I, feeling that within this hurly-burly a certain safety and relief remained.

"Oh! You have been absent from me all evening, and now you want to shut the door between! I am very much hurt."

I closed the window. There was a taste in my mouth as of blood.

"Steve! You have not read me the chapter, nor said a prayer."

"Not to-night, Ida. My head aches badly."

"Oh, Steve, dear! We 've never missed once since we were married."

"I know it," said I—and did I not know it?—"but to-night I cannot; I cannot see the words."

"This is very unlike you!"

There was a pause, and a sound of crying. My heart beat like a sledge hammer, and my hands were cold. I panted for the air I had shut out.

"We cannot miss the prayer, Steve! Dearie! shall I say it?" she presently asked.

"If you like."

I left the window, against which I had been pressing my brow, and sat down, breathing and gasping heavily. And I covered my ears so that I might not hear the voice. But the murmur of it penetrated, though the meaning of the flowing words fell short.

Presently I became aware that she had ceased praying, and was calling me by name.

"Yes?" said I.

"I have called several times, Steve!" said she reproachfully.

"Have you?" said I.

And then habit, fatally taking me by the hand, led me to walk back into her room. She lay upon the bed; the lamp burned upon a table on the side beyond me, so as to throw the light on her face. An open Bible was supported on a reading desk across her knees. She raised her tear-stained eyes in mild reproach.

"Steve, dear! You have not been yourself to-night."

"I am sorry, Ida," said I dully.

"And I have had more need of you than usual! After these days of exhausting emotion! My poor attempt to deny myself for God—"

"I am sorry, Ida," I repeated hastily.

"Well! I have great need of resignation. At least you will give me my medicine. I cannot reach it for myself."

"Ah, yes! Your medicine," said I.

Near her bed was a small table, upon which stood the various bottles. She drank at night some slight mixture which was intended as a cooling draught. On those occasions when sleep fled she took an opiate. The mixture was the ordinary potion, and I knew it. So far, my mind acted clearly ; and the obligation to do something, however small, had for the moment a composing effect ; so that I went up to the table, selected the right bottle, and measured the exact quantity into the glass. And then I was about to turn back to the bed.

“ Have you filled the glass up with water ? ” asked Ida.

“ No,” said I ; “ I forgot that.”

“ You know I like water with it ! You have added water to it every night for years.”

For years and years ! Yes, I had. I went back to the table thinking of that, and filled the glass to the brim. Once more I took a step to the bed.

Ida was sitting up, supported by pillows.

I looked at her as I approached—the too stout figure, the thin and faded hair tightly fastened for the night, the hopelessly precise features, the ungenial, over-sweet expression—and a qualm of dislike shot over me.

It was in such a moment of this, to me, unnatural feeling towards a fellow-creature, that an odour from the glass I carried affected me. Something was wrong with the medicine I had mixed. And then officious memory bore me back over the last few minutes of time, and showed me unerringly the thing that had happened, and how habit had played me false. I saw that I had gone back to the table and had raised the sleeping draught instead of the water, and had filled the medicine glass to the brim with that.

There were two steps only between me and the bed, two seconds of time between my hand and her lips, when I made my discovery. But within those two seconds and two steps what sharp cutting off, what hair-breadth chances, what vast undoing! Could time and

space but have kept by so long, so much, ahead of my understanding !

It was all the difference to me.

But the tiny beats were behind and not before my understanding ; and thought and my will followed. The lightning flash, the moment—these measured terms are too long, too slow, by which to express the leaping of my thought and will after my understanding. There is no name for the laden brevity in which I saw my deed, conceived my hope, and took my resolve ; the two seconds, the two steps still lay before me, and were ample for rejection, repentance, and the saving of my soul. Nothing appreciable went out of time. Eternity alone could plumb that unfathomed something which, evading our finest measurements, yet so weightily passed by.

I perceived how my unconscious error had placed the unriddling of the knot in my own hand, how here, in the cup, was the mild quiescence of my torment, how, by a method so simple and final, the ghastly problem lay

solved and finished. And with this conception fell peace as of unutterable relief. Like Samson, I had blindly stretched my hands and found the pillars of this house of my misery, and had taken them within my grasp; and I had but to bow myself and to carry it with me to the ground.

For her it was only a deep and painless sleep. On that thought I went forward as through some unresisting element, feeling simply hope, relief, and resolve as I crossed the inconsiderable barrier between me and my act. But my body was cold.

The glass passed from my hand to my wife's. She raised it to her lips and swallowed the contents. I scarcely breathed as I saw her do it. So small a thing was it! so little and common an act! It was part of the merest order of my routined life. I seemed to stand by watching, like a great, perplexed child.

She handed me back the glass.

"What time is it, Steve?" she asked.

I drew the watch from my pocket and looked at it.

"Eleven," I answered.

"How late!" said she. "Oh, dear! how late!"

I unfastened my watch-guard, and walked up to the table by the fireplace, and placed the glass upon it. Then I wound up my watch, and laid it by the glass. Ida liked the ticking of a watch during the night, and this was my invariable practice. Had anything happened—*really*? I began to ask myself such a question; and, instead of going to my own room, I turned back towards Ida. She still sat up. Her expression was of perplexity, and she was feeling her lips with her tongue.

"It tasted very—*strange*," said she.

"Yes," said I.

She raised her handkerchief to her mouth, and I could see her perplexed eyes staring above it. Her senses were ever slow and dull.

"You did not, by any chance, give me chloral?" said she.

"Yes," said I.

"Oh, Stephen! Why?"

"I made a mistake," said I.

"A mistake?"

"I filled the glass up with chloral instead of with water."

Her face grew paler and longer, and her brows contracted over her perplexed eyes.

"Was n't that rather much?" asked she hesitatingly.

"Yes."

"Oh, Steve! does it matter?"

"Ida," said I very slowly and gently, "it does matter."

"It won't hurt me, will it?"

I was as cold as death, and I closed my eyes. I had thought only of her sleep; I had not thought of this.

"It will not hurt," I said.

"Well, will it do any harm?"

"Yes," said I.

"Steve! what can you mean? What *can* you mean?"

I stood there, with my eyes closed. I tried to shape a word, but failed. The room was very silent now, but outside the wind plucked at the casements.

“You can’t mean—?” said she.

“Yes,” said I.

“Oh, my God!”

That was a long, moaning shriek. I had forgotten one thing—how Ida loved her life, how she enjoyed it. My hands began to tremble again, and I could not open my eyes.

“Stephen! Wake up! Do something! Save me, Stephen, save me!”

And then I opened my eyes and stared at her blankly. She was horrible in her terror. The coffee-brown eyes had dwindled to two hard dots.

“Open the windows!” cried she; “I must have air. Stephen, I *can* be saved. I know what to do.”

I ran, as she bade me, to the windows, and began to throw them wide. The wind rushed in and blew out the lamp, and I heard the

crash of glass, and the curtains flew out into the room. Ida did not seem to notice.

"Help me out of bed," said she, in a new, strong voice I had never heard.

"The doctor," said I. "Shall I send?"

"He lives too far; it is no use. I must walk about. I shall be saved, Stephen! This air is everything."

I was by her side, and she had already put her feet out of bed. She caught hold of me, and, sliding down, steadied herself, for the first time for over nine years, on her feet. The blaze of the lamp was extinguished, but I had left a candle lighted in my own room, and this, partially protected from the wind, burned flickeringly, and threw an uncertain light upon us. By that light I saw my wife's face, and saw her form struggling with unaccustomed steps. It was something to scare the sense away. She fought for life with awful tenacity, and I, stupefied though I was with horror, helped in that struggle with a like frenzy of endeavour. For three hours of the night, without speech

between us other than exclamations, cries and prayers from her, she, reduced to the most primitive and universal of animal instincts, fought for her life, dragging her half-paralysed limbs by the sheer force of her will up and down the room, staggering, reeling, but ever moving, her eyes hard beads of terror, her mouth and nostrils quivering with effort and resolve.

So, for three hours of time, pacing up and down, her hands clutching my arm, her weight hanging about me. The drops of perspiration streamed from my brow ; but I remained in feeling cold as ice, and I was speechless—the words of my tongue being frozen up in the amazement with which I gazed at the secret of my heart.

The candle went out. We pursued that losing race with death in the dark, she sometimes collapsing, and then with stupendous effort recovering herself, and all the time hanging her awful weight upon my arm. By two o'clock a little early light came into the window. The wind had changed and gone down.

Then I felt her body dragging very heavily upon me. I raised her up, and we stood there looking one on the other, she, within my arms, breathing with difficulty, and her eyes close to mine. A film lay over my own.

"Stephen," said she, "it is coming; I can't fight more."

"Ida," said I, "can you stand—or sit—while I call Mary?"

"No," said she sharply; "you must not leave me. What is the use of Mary? Oh, Stephen, do something!"

"Walk," said I, "walk."

"No," said she, "it is no use. We must do something else. Pray, Stephen, pray! I believe you can save me; I have faith. You saved the boatful of men. Save *me*!"

Whereat I shrank back with a hoarse cry, and suddenly I strove to free myself from that which clung within my arms.

She screamed my name, and caught at me with tenacious fingers.

"Pray," cried she, "pray!"

And I, pushing her back, shouted out—as to ears that were deaf—that I could not pray. And suddenly I felt her draw her hands from my arms. I thought she would have fallen, and I looked towards her, taking a breath. But she stood upright and alone before me—she who had not stood alone for years—a thing to fright the wits, and madden the mind. And the merciless light of the dawn came in. Her face was more instinct with life and thought than I had seen it during the years of our existence together ; it was changed by sudden apprehension, lit by an idea. A message from the world of thought and feeling outside herself, going like a swift and mighty arrow, had stung her back to earth from the edge of the grave. Her eyes, solemn and penetrating, were intent on mine.

“Stephen,” she commanded, “pray ! Ask God for my life.”

And I was dumb.

“Pray !” she reiterated, with lifted hand.

I shook my head.

"Entreat my life from Heaven," she cried.
And suddenly I was calm and found myself.

"Anything to save you I will do," said I;
"but I will not pray."

"It is the one thing left. Pray!"

"It is one life against another, one wish against another. I will not pray."

"A miracle will save me. *Pray.*"

"I do not ask it."

"Kiss me, my husband."

"Nor that. If there is an act which will bring you back your life I will do it, but I will neither pray nor kiss."

"Stephen?"

"Yes; I have said it."

"Stephen?"

"It is as you think."

"You put the poison in the cup knowingly?"

"I put it there in error. I gave it knowingly."

"You are my murderer."

"It may be so. I seem to have been fight-

ing for my life. Go up and accuse me before your God."

And then she removed her eyes from my face, and looked down, Death being held off by the immense and sudden movement of her mind as the truth touched it. And after that, without regarding me, she lifted up her hand and her face.

"Ellinor! Ellinor! Ellinor!" cried she.

And, having thus cried, not on God, but on her fellow-woman, I saw upon her the change of approaching death. I thought she would have fallen, and stepped towards her with outstretched arms. But she waved me aside. She made one more stupendous effort, and in that awful moment I beheld, for the first time, waken in the eyes of Ida the look of an ardent human soul, intent upon great action.

"A paper and pencil! Quick! quick! a paper and pencil!" whispered she. "God! keep me alive a minute longer. God! I demand one minute as my right!"

I gave her a torn envelope from my pocket,

and my pencil. I watched her movements now in a strange, frozen stillness. Truth lay between us at last, and our spirits stood each in its own plane.

She took what I gave, and with the same immense effort of will, carried it to the table, and wrote in wild hurry. When that was done, she left it where she had written it, and turned, and, without speaking and without asking help, walked back to the bed. Here she paused for a moment, and again, with lifted hand, and in a strong, solemn voice, called, not on God, but on her fellow-woman.

“Ellinor ! Ellinor ! Ellinor !” cried she.

Then she lay down. I stood where I was as though enchanted. All that I saw passed by as a vivid vision, as something indescribably unreal. I remarked that she placed her head upon the pillow, and composed the coverlet about her form.

“Ida, for God’s sake don’t lie down.” I whispered, in a strange frozen voice.

And I came forward, even putting my hand

out to raise her head. She faintly waved me off. The action of the hand, feeble as it was, had a gesture of imperious command; and such was also the look of the eyes that opened for one more glance at my face. They arrested me where I stood, holding me off, rooting my feet to the ground, and bidding me, with enchaining strength and power of command, to leave the deed that I had done where it was.

And so I stood as in a circle of enchantment; and the eyes of my wife closed, and in a moment the room was filled with the deep, slow, regular breathing of the sleeper sleeping her last sleep.

I stood, as it were, locked in a spell, rooted to the ground. The blinds, drawn up in our first excitement, let in the slowly increasing dawn, and by the light I watched the sleeper sleeping her last sleep, the hand lying upon the coverlet. I moved not one inch nearer, but stared with wild eyes. And by and bye the face changed, and there was no more breathing.

Within the room was utter silence and stillness. My own breath was silent, as though that had been stopped, too. And then I was aware of a great Presence near me, the wings of which filled the four corners of the room. I knew that softening Presence, dark, great, calm, of this world, yet not of it. Its business was not with me. It put no merciful period to the changed beating of my heart. Me it passed by. I stood in the midst of it, but it let me alone. Yet I felt that it was something that overwhelmed and closed up my senses, so that the stillness and silence of the room were beyond reality, and the early twilight seemed as a pall of darkness about me.

By and bye, I distinguished a slight regular sound, which grew to be a loud noise in my ears—a loud, quick, terrifying noise. I moved my head apprehensively. The sound I heard was the watch on the table where I had laid it beside the empty glass, ticking fast and sharp, and thumping like a sledge-hammer to my returning hearing, and marking the horrify-

ing flight of time, and me in the midst of it there with my deed.

Then I began to move, not towards the bed, but round the edges of the room to the door. I never dreamed of taking from the table, or reading, the paper Ida had left there. I supposed I knew what was written ; I felt the words reflected in my mind.

“ My husband is my murderer,” I thought they ran.





CHAPTER XIII.

I CLOSED the door behind me and left the death summoned by myself alone in the room.

I will not believe that merely in my imagination a Presence was there. He, the Angel, summoned by man, filled the chamber ; his wings swept to the corners of the ceiling, his head of shadows leaned towards the bed, while, with great amazed eyes, he looked towards the Judgment Throne that stands in the heart of things—he, man summoned.

I was passing slowly along the landing, my brow bent, my hand shading my downcast eyes, as thus I saw the chamber I had left. And it grieved me that my escaping memories should break with insolent riot back into that

place of peace, and intrude their crazy noise about the dead. So that with an effort of will I strove to recall and collect them back to myself. And as I did so, creeping slowly along the while with many a mazed pause, I had on the surface of my mind an intention to knock at Mary Maver's door, to call her, and to speak what words convenient to myself I could string together. But concentration upon this purpose was hindered by the wish that I could stifle the whispering together of my under-thoughts, because, huddled together below, cheek-by-jowl though they were, I thought their voices still penetrated through all sounds, noisily coming into sacred and public places, and mounting to the house-tops.

I walked slowly on to the top of the stairs and down across the hall, and then up the short flight that led to Mary's bedroom above the scullery. And being here, I paused, sighing heavily, and being troubled by that mob of dark thoughts that still hurried up from the immense distance, and still made ready riot-

ously to invade the front places of my mind. I laid my hand on Mary Maver's door. The message I carried was all but forgotten, but with my feeble, exhausted powers I traced it out.

"My wife is dead."

It lay in my mind as an idle form, a phrase without sense. And then suddenly the meaning broke from it, and with that came a wild burst of joy and relief that shook me between tears and laughter, so that I must perforce take hold of composure with both hands of my will, fixing it upon myself not to intrude upon the sleeper with a maniacal aspect and a ghastly parody of good news, and constraining myself to turn the handle quietly and to enter with noiseless steps.

This side of the house had a northern aspect, and the blind was down, so that the early light was grey and meagre. But I could see the furnishing of the room. There was a chair, upon which Mary's coarse, clean garments were neatly folded, the rough shoes

standing beneath ; I saw the ewer on the floor, and the brown basin on the stand, and the small looking-glass on the drawers, with a book or two and a work-box before it. Over the mantelpiece was a cheap coloured print that represented Christ blessing little children. It was an odd fancy of this stern and single woman to put it there ; and I went and stood before it, looking at it, and striving after composure. Christ blessing little children !

And then I turned to the bed on which Mary lay. How different is the stillness of sleep from that of death ! Under the quilt the form of the sleeper was relaxed, but did not sink, the pressure of the living head upon the pillow was light, the plain features had the colour of life in them, and everywhere was a slight, faint movement. I went up to her side and very gently touched her, and I strove mightily after self-command.

In a moment she was awake, and had looked, with the faithful understanding that had followed me so long, straight into my tell-tale

eyes. And, with that she sat up in the bed, the grey hair escaping from the falling cap, and her face changing. It was as the breaking-up of an ice-bound stream, the grim inexpressiveness being dispersed in such a stir of apprehension and suspense as I had never seen in it before. And she grasped me by the wrist.

At her touch, my thoughts fell together into a mad jangle, and the self-control I had gathered scattered before them ; and when, out of the mob and the hubbub, one predominant idea was separated from the rest, it was but the sense of relief. And this running before the others, indecently clapped the hands of a crazy, irresistible joy, so that I heard with dismay my own laughter breaking through the room.

“ Mary ! ” I cried, “ she is dead ! she is dead ! It is all over ! I — ”

It was not want of words, it was the thrust of her hands upon me—one in my hair, one over my mouth—that caught and stifled the

rest of my phrase. She was kneeling up in bed in her calico bedgown, her cap fell back, and her uncovered head was strange to me, with the loosened locks straying over her shoulders.

"I understand, lad," she called, with a clear, insistent voice in my ear; "I understand. She's took with her fits. Now, thou must run after the doctor, lad. Run at once!"

Then she smote me on the breast, and thrust me from her. I retreated slowly. I paused at the bottom of the bed.

"Mary—" I began.

She knelt up before me, her hands clasped—exponents of an agony of prayer directed to God, not to me. To me her lips repeated the firm, common-sense, commonplace words in the same clear, sane voice—the voice which broke up and snatched my faltering phrase. And she nodded at me as she spoke, in brisk command:

"Run round to Belcher's, the washerman's, lad, and throw a stone at the corner window. Ask him to lend thee the grey mare. Call

out t' him that thou 'll saddle it thyself. Say that thy wife's took very bad, and that thou'rt running after the doctor. He 'll pitch t' key out o' window, and thou 'll find the saddle and bridle in the shed with the horse. Run, lad, out o' yon door!"

She pointed with her finger, and I, driven by the ecstasy of her determination, found my thoughts concentrated upon the effort to obey her, so that I ran out, and forthwith to Belcher's as she bade me. And having come there, I took up a stone, and—still held as a child by the words of another—threw it, as she had said, at the corner window. The head of a man was thrust forth, and a grumbling voice asked my business, but, looking more narrowly upon me, his tone changed.

"Mr. Whapshare, sir!" cried he, astonished, "let me cast my clothes about me and I 'll open the door."

"No," said I. "Throw me the key of the shed, and let me take the grey mare that I may ride for the doctor."

"Some one ill?"

"Yes," said I.

The head disappeared, and through the window I heard him speak to his wife.

"It's Mr. Whapshare below, and he be in a great taking. 'T is his wife, I reckon."

"Throw en the key, James. All flesh be mortal! But to my mind if any dies hard 't will be that lady."

And the key came spinning down at my feet.

Thus constrained by the will of Mary Maver, I found myself moving from one ordinary action to another, and preserving my sanity by a passage through commonplace instants. And without any clear choice of my own in the matter, I saddled the mare and rode off for the doctor. The movement and the cool morning air brought over me an apathy and oblivion, so that, reaching the doctor's house, I delivered my information briefly, and having bidden him come after me, rode away, leaving him to follow with what speed he could. The way lay

over the moor, and the doctor, upon his horse, overtook me shortly ; but the narrowness of the moor paths prevented our riding side by side, and I went silent and alone, and glad that it was so. The sun was now rising, and I turned my face to catch the first rays, and opened my lungs to take fresh air. I was as one bathing in simple joys ; it was not cunning that kept me from speech, it was pre-occupation with the beautiful aspect of a morning world. The sense of freedom, of which I had been so long deprived, filled the moment to the brim, and I looked no further.

When we reached the house, Mary opened the door, and, without glancing my way, bade the doctor come upstairs. He threw the reins to me and hurried. I led the horses to the back, and tethered his, where was a near patch of grass for cropping, and then I led the grey mare back to Belcher's. I felt my way over the commonplace moments as one prizing them and hoarding a joy.

They were moving about upstairs when I

returned, and I went into the study, where the sound of the steps did not reach me, and sat down. Out of the window spread the beautiful moor with the sunrise upon it. And on that I gazed with content, my thoughts—vague, idle, and but half-conscious—clustered drunken about the deep, relieved sense of finish. And from that I passed to mere physical collapse, so that, throwing myself back upon the chair, I fell to nodding, and at last to sleep.

I was awakened by the opening of the door. The doctor stood on the threshold, his eyes fixed upon me.

He was a tallish man, with very thin legs; his coat was a cut-away in black velveteen, and he wore it in a jaunty manner that was too young for him; his face was carefully shaven, and his features ran somewhat to caricature, as of a youth who has withered instead of matured. So have I seen a little red apple shrivelled on the tree. And his fair hair was carefully curled. All this I minutely noted.

And I saw that he stood upon the threshold

of my room as though shrinking under the burden of an action too great for him—he, the herald of grave news which it misgave him to feel he could not deliver aright. And I, perceiving his embarrassment, rose from my chair, and, with the ordinary courtesy of every day, invited him in. He closed the door behind him, but crept and shuffled about the table, his lips nervous, and his eyes round with the knowledge he carried. Whereat I, in morning cordiality, extended further welcome, and pushed out a chair.

“Sit down, doctor, sit down,” said I. “We have a fine day.”

“A fine day, Mr. Whapshare, truly. But I come on grave business.”

“Yes,” said I. “My wife?”

“Sir,” said he, still standing, and staring at the table, “this is a most unfortunate matter.”

And then he absently rubbed away a morsel of dust that lay on the table with his finger.

“Will you not sit down, doctor?” I repeated.

He shrank into a chair, drawing his long

legs stealthily under it. And I marvelled that it was he showed this discomposure, while my pulse beat steadily enough.

"It is first my unpleasant duty to tell you there is no hope," said he.

"You have been unable to revive her?"

"Quite unable. Mr. Whapshare, she was dead when I arrived."

I bowed my head.

"And you know, sir, that the best doctor cannot recall the dead," stuttered he.

"I have not asked it of you," said I gravely.

And then I noticed that he concealed in his hand a torn piece of paper.

To me it was a foregone conclusion what were the contents of that paper, and to a more reasoning mind my indifference and tranquillity had already a score of times betrayed me. But this was a man who conceives of the world as a stage, and beholds in every event an act of the drama and an opportunity for a part; and, knowing himself an incompetent, timid actor, he sat now blindly casting about for the

right conventional bearing in which to acquit himself of his share.

"What is the time?" I asked slowly, my eyes on his hand.

"Close on eleven. Your servant, a discreet and serviceable person, begged that you should be spared. We opened the door some time since, but you had fallen into a deep slumber, and I agreed that, after the events of the night, it would be cruel to disturb you."

"*The events of the night!*" I repeated solemnly, my eyes upon the landscape.

"The events of the night, sir. I—we—have ventured to act without you."

"Thank you," said I.

"'T is a disagreeable business, sir," and he partially opened his hand.

"Yes," said I.

"The case is not common."

"New in your experience, perhaps."

"You will for yourself understand its bearings when I say that, while you slept, I took upon myself to send for the sergeant of police

to take down a deposition before your servant and Mrs. Belcher.—Sir! I wish to spare you. Belcher rode over to the police.”

“Belcher?” I repeated.

“The sergeant has been and gone. There was really no occasion to disturb you. We wished to spare you as long as possible, for I am sorry to say great trouble and annoyance are before you, for”—the man took out a handkerchief, which I remarked was a very fine cambric one, and mopped his brow—“I really can’t hide the truth, Mr. Whapshare.”

“Why should you?”

“Since you take it calmly.” He now, with a curious nervous movement, raised his hand, and disclosed the torn paper. “There will be an inquest, Mr. Whapshare.”

“An inquest! Yes?”

“In these cases, however plain the conclusion, the formality must be gone through.”

And then he raised the paper and nervously fluttered it before me.

"What is it you have in that paper?" I asked, with my eyes firmly upon it.

"Your wife's last message. I have brought it to you to read—but, in effect, it must remain in the hands of the police. It, unfortunately, establishes beyond a doubt that this event—which, left to myself, I should have explained as an extraordinary mishap—is a case of deliberate suicide."

"Of suicide!"

I called it out in a great amazed cry that rang through the house.

The spindle-legged doctor leapt to his feet, pushing the paper nervously across the table towards me.

"Read it, sir, in private," cried he hastily. "Allow me to leave you; still, let me remind you in your grief, sir—after all—it is the same thing in the end. The issue is the same, Mr. Whapshare, I mean. Whatever the means, death comes at last. Your wife, sir—you are, in the summing up, just as others are, Mr. Whapshare."

And as I stretched my hand for the paper, he fairly ran. I read it when the door had closed.

"My living as I do involves too much to others. I cannot, and I will not, bear it. I take my life into my own hands. I have drunk chloral.—Ida Whapshare."





CHAPTER XIV.

THE paper Ida left behind was adjudged at the inquest to be the main testimony, and the questioning turned simply on my efforts to restore her. Suspicion did not look my way, and conjecture spent itself in many ingenious interpretations of the fact. All this I observed in silence, for I had no impulse towards confession. The event was to myself inexplicable, how therefore should I give an account of it to my fellow-man? The act to which I had arrived stood detached from the preface and preparation of my life as I could read it; it was there, yet how it came there I had no power to explain. There are accidents in the material world when the forces in use by man evade his control, and occasion death and

disaster ; we speak of these as "*the act of God.*" In what did my event differ from them ?

The momentary bustle sank, and men and women returned to more personal interests, and my wife lay under the sod. When all was over to others, the consequence began for me.

I was a free man ; and by Mary's care even the traces of the former existence were as far as possible effaced. She locked up the fatal room upstairs, and everywhere made changes in the disposal of the furniture. My meals she spread in the kitchen, while the sitting-room below was turned exclusively into my study. Thus was my house swept and garnished. Whereon there entered into it and took possession a sombre train of ghostly visitants. I was free, and yet had no motions towards fulfilling that dream of action of which my marriage had baulked me. The dream was gone. I spent my leisure, not in planning my activity, but amidst the dark circle of my mind, questioning one shadowy presence after an-

other, in my vain endeavour to bring light that never came.

I could not but note that the extreme act to which I had been driven, though it had killed the body of my wife, had stung her soul into being ; that the situation into which we were brought, though it had startled crime from me, had startled the one fine action of her life from her. Was this to be ignored in the summing up ? Disentangled from the various illusions of mortal minds, her acquiescence in my deed contained, I thought, more of the elements of the permanent than did the frenzied impulse within me which preceded it. Close on my crime had flown into the realm of the unchangeable that eldest and instant fruit of it. *Was* I the slayer of my wife, or was not her fine share of it the essential portion of the combined deed ?

If not, how great was that murder of me which had slain not only my life but my soul !

But that "Unchangeable"! How the thought of it—even now—flowed round this burning

shore of my little isolation with a sense of vastness. So that, feeling it, I was sometimes able to take my act, and to behold it freed from this circumstance of Time.

And in the momentary ease of that perception it penetratingly entered my mind that in the absolute truth of things is no Time; and that, viewed from this standpoint of absolute truth, the nature of guilt and of righteousness changes to that which is relative merely. I thought that I perceived how man's sense of error and wandering shapes, and is shaped by, this illusive conception of Time. We name that the Present which is a fleeing away from point to point, and rest our sense of abidingness on the flight of moments. As our foot leaves one instant we name it Past, and as it touches the next we name it Future, dividing into three terms our broken understanding of the Permanent.

And yet is not this the truth—that the Eternal lies behind our days and our hours, as a full-blown, uncreated, and imperishable

flower? And is it not earth's doom that we ourselves seem to be no part of it, but to be passing with separated steps over it, creeping as blind insects from petal to petal? Thus have movement and life become mere time and passage to the limited eye of man, who, dwelling on his own steps, names them progress or retrogression. But still the perfect and lasting flower abides, and the pulsating sequence of life within neither changes, mars, nor beautifies.

Thus in moments did my mind search after the cooling touch of the Eternal. And then would this calming philosophy of the intellect be re-invaded by the bitter sense and shame of human guilt—itsself also deep in the scheme of things, and strong to overwhelm. And so, fallen back on my mortality, I would see myself again conditioned and prisoned by that I alone *knew*, Time the great fact of my existence, and myself undone by two of its mighty seconds.

In this season of my darkness, I retained sanity enough to perform my duties to the

children of the school. Within the school walls I wakened a little from my living death, and escaped the memories of my sorrows and crime in the contemplation of the brightness and innocence before me, and in the glad task of their training and cultivation.

But if I found myself able to come within these pure pastures, it was not the same in regard to the noble and loving woman who was near myself. I shrank from the idea of her, dreading even the approach of my spirit to Ellinor's ; and drove from me as the jealous gaoler of my own deed, with rough unwelcome, the tender beginnings of that sweet and beautiful appearance within my own mind, which I named the thought of her.

I had not seen her. News came through Mary that the cottage where she had lived was deserted, and that no one met her in the neighbourhood. She had left, it seemed, before the death of Ida ; whereat I gathered that my wife's note of dismissal was the cause, and something of thankfulness went from me that

thus my highest good was happily delivered from a presence dark as mine.

Of this earth's comfort Mary was left. And here I had no compunction. The deep understanding of her homely love was my repose. As the leper turns to light and air, and none debars him from elements common and necessary to all, so did I accept, without demur, the companionship and love of Mary. For, at worst, the murderer and leper are human. And still I found myself capable of love and care for others, and still discovered within myself a share of the beneficence which binds man to his kind. But this humanity! How did the thought of it vex and perplex me when I considered the dark act which had sprung from that part of it, hitherto harmless, which I named myself.

I sheltered myself a little from the storms that broke over my mind in Mary's presence and love. It was the homeliness of them that brought me courage, even for so much refuge.

One night a great and sudden fear laid hold upon me, so that I ran from the study, where I was alone, and burst in on Mary in the kitchen. I had fallen into a cold sweat of anguish and fear, and yet knew no greater occasion for this than was now common to me. But as I rushed with my white face and disordered mien into the kitchen, I bethought me how this causeless, yet intolerable, alarm would affect her also ; so that, hardly had I stepped into the room than I turned to go again.

"Lad," she cried, "lad !"

Then I hesitated, with burning, staring eyes.

"Come," said she, "come in and sit a while."

Then I came on.

"Mary," said I, standing before her, "my heart is broken."

"Aye," said she, "mine too."

"The peace in the kitchen drives me away. I have no right to remain," I cried.

"Where thy poor Mary bides there thou can always come," she answered.

But I saw how her hands trembled.

"No, no!" cried I, and covered my eyes;
"you do not know me, Mary."

I heard her raking at the cinders with aimless blows—she, composed and taciturn at other times, being shaken now.

"I'm thinking that I know thee, lad," said she, her voice strange, and broken, and low.

"I have a secret damns me," said I.

"Lad,"—and her tones were loud with fear
—"come in and sit yon."

And I uncovered my eyes and, shivering and cold, sat down as a stranger timidly at my own fireside; and the eyes of the woman opposite were clouded with tears, and her hands shook on her knee. I was ready to rise and creep away again; for there was that in my heart which I thought blighted the place where I came, and from which faithful love itself hid the face. And yet I had impulses towards confession, and a craving for so much human presence as this.

"Mary,"—I whispered it as a beaten child

might do—"Mary, my presence is dark to you? Dark and very—*strange*?"

"There, lad, you're wrong," answered the trembling voice which I scarcely knew; "come often to the kitchen and sit a bit. You give to dark fancies what should be given to a poor, plain body like me that loves your presence."

"Is that so, indeed?"

"That is so."

And then I was quiet a little while, holding my hands to the blaze, and wonderingly gazing at the thing I had done, as a child might gaze at the broken wreck of his own mischief. And she was quiet, too, save that under her breath I heard her murmuring, "Lord ha' mercy! The good Lord ha' mercy on us!" and then presently my tongue spoke of what my mind considered.

"I did it, Mary," I said, quite suddenly and softly.

She pushed her chair back with a quick, sharp movement, and threw her apron over her face.

"I did it," I repeated sadly and gently, and wondering at my speech. "I did it; but how it came about I do not know."

She drew the apron from her face, and spoke with an agitated voice.

"There's them," she cried, "can judge atwixt you!"

And she lifted up her hand.

"Mary," I said, "I broke man's law. I do not care to live, and yet I have no will to choose to die. I am Fate's creature."

"Live and mend, lad," said she. "What does God want with dying? Live and mend."

"I broke man's law," I repeated.

"The common sight o' folk don't count for much," she said. "Man's blame is but injustice. Here's a heart that carries half the burden with thee, lad."

"You will not give me up?"

"The good Lord in heaven forbid!"

"Ah! but, Mary, I've broken God's law—if there be a God!"

She rose from her chair, and stood stretch-

ing her thin, gaunt figure, and lifting her hand. The tears rained down her cheeks, for she was surrendered to an emotion too great even for her concealment or control, and in her attitude was a certain grandeur.

"I'm thinking there's a God, lad," she cried. "And I'm thinking that He who made the law made likewise the breaker of it."

And with those words I came into a sudden quiet.

Mary sat down again, sobbing a little, with the apron once more over her eyes, rocking, too, gently in her chair. And then by degrees she sank to her ordinary demeanour, her hands clasped on her knees, her still face turned to the fire. I watched first her, then the blaze, and something of wonder and softness crept into my black heart. There was no more spoken, save that, an hour or two later, she rose and lit my candle, and, bringing it to my side, whispered me in the ear.

"Lad," said she, "seek another man more wretched than thyself."



CHAPTER XV.

WAS there any man more miserable than myself?

It happened a day or two afterwards, I saw approaching me in the lane a drunken fellow, who reeled and fell even as I came up with him. As I stooped and turned him over, I saw him to be one, Tommy Short, a poor, sliding creature, who made good resolves of lasting temperance by the stimulating aid of a glass of spirits. A tottering soul he was of relapses and remorse, with nothing in him of the more hopeful rascality of the steady sinner. By trade, he was a coach-builder's assistant, and an indifferent one at that. In aspiration he was an evangelist exhorter of his fellow-men, a plucker of brands from the burning; in fact,

he was just a boozing idler at the Oak Tree Inn.

When, after some effort, I had brought him to the bank for support, and had got him into a sitting posture, I perceived, struggling through the imbecility of his appearance, a ray of cunning, and he tipsily extended his hand and attempted an oration.

"Mr. Whapshare, sir," he began, "I be rayther overcome. Satan, Mr. Whapshare, like a roaring lion, runneth about to devour ; and he don't discriminate. And we be all feeble creatures as the conies, sir ; and I be caught by the heat o' the day and overcome."

Finding him thus at the low ebb of his self-respect, it was my evident business to bring him home to his wife, whom I knew as a silent woman with eyes of protesting shame. So I hauled him up by the collar, and brought him through the village, and so to the doorstep of his own house.

I could not but note, as we passed, that the elder villagers stood aside, more respectful,

I judged, to my mourning dress than to the condition of poor Tommy. Only the children, irrepressible and irreverent as is their innocent nature, pattered after. These I did not rebuke ; but, having deposited my burden on his own doorstep, I called to the half-circle of small rabble behind me, and, being grieved that they should receive an impression so unsavoury, took as my text the first story of heroic endurance that came to my mind, and sent them home with that.

After this Tommy became by degrees a charge to me and one that lasted. For the next few months at least, on a Saturday evening, my black and brooding habit would be broken into, at not infrequent intervals, by the opening of the study door, and I would raise my head to find Mary standing there, a child of ten years lurking somewhere in the region of her skirts, and gazing at me across a protecting fold with a round, bright eye ; and him she would announce as "Tommy Short's eldest." Then in he would patter

over the threshold, sparsely clad, as to the legs, in a pair of knickerbockers too short and small for him, but wrapped up as to the neck in a superfluity of red knitted comforter. Having arrived this side the closing door, he would fill the room with a sound of heavy breathing, and stand twisting a tiny cap round and round in his hands. At times so deep was I sunk amidst the dark places of my mind that the apparition of the child seemed to be from some world not within my ken, and I would stare at the round-featured face twinkling before me in irrelevant innocence. And then he would impatiently push up to me and beat with his soiled little hand on my knee and cry :

“Please, master, father he be drinking at the Oak Tree Inn again, he a-be.”

The mutual ministrations between Tommy Short and me endured during the winter months until March was at hand. With March the weather became warm, and the appearance of flowers was early, and with

this rising of the sap and swelling of buds, a trouble, not unmingled by sweetness, for me who looked no more for sweetness, began.

Ellinor Blakemore returned to the cottage. In the nearness of her presence I found it impossible to drive away the gentle intrusion of her appearance within the chambers of my mind. At first it was "news,"—"Ellinor is here; she has returned." And I passed the message by as having, in the scheme of things, no reference to myself. And yet it added to my day, coming suddenly to my mind as a bird lights on a perch to rest there. As March went on, her name, when I was present, would slip from the tongue of others, and, by degrees, that presence in the cottage on the ridge beyond the links, as the delicate and fragrant scents of the returning spring are wafted nearer and nearer day by day, came to be an all-pervading atmosphere in which I could not choose but consciously and blessedly to live, and which yet, when the thought pressed closely, threw me into a great trem-

bling fear lest that which was precious to me might, by the nearness of my presence, be injured or wounded.

I did not see her, and her name did not pass between Mary and myself.

One day as I went by the girls' play-ground at the school I saw a fair-haired child bending over her sewing in a corner. I paused, and, taking it from her hand, reminded her that this was the hour for play. The little creature, seeing the work lifted in my hands so far above her, anxiously protested that this was her play.

"How's that?" said I.

And I spread the work out on my palm, and found it to be a small bag made from fine material of a china-blue colour that took my fancy.

"Because it's a present, master," said she shamefacedly, "a present for you."

"For me!" I repeated, loath that the child should steal from her school hours to stitch for me. "And what shall I do with a bag?"

"Keep things in it," said she.

"That's true," said I; "and there are many odd things I lose for want of a place to put them in."

So I humoured the child, and thanked her, being mindful that trifles appear great to the young minds of children.

"It is a beautiful colour," said I, replacing it in her little glad hands; "and how did you come by such a beautiful blue?"

"It is a bit of a dress," said she. "It is a piece of Miss Blakemore's beautiful gown that I thought so pretty. I carried her the milk, and she gave me some cake, and then a little piece of this stuff to dress my doll in, but I asked to make a bag of it for master, who had been kind to little Willie."

I laid my hand on the child's head, and turned away. How beautiful and gentle was this world in which I, the criminal, lived and moved! That night the china-blue bag arrived, and thus it came about that a piece of Ellinor Blakemore's dress hung in my study.

The feeling of her nearness came closer and closer, until at times it penetrated me as an invisible, yet present, sweetness.

One day I saw the dress, whose china-blue colour had thus been made familiar to me, flitting down the road before me, and I turned and ran the other way, nor stayed until I came to a great distance, and in the loneliness of it sat down, with heart and pulses beating heavily. And here, when quiet returned to me, I weighed the matter in my mind, and then I took the thing as it was, and, from the sombre and limited material of my unhappy existence, cut out the pattern of right-doing, and ruthlessly cast aside the deceptive embroideries worked by fancy, and even closed my eyes to the half-hid jewels that Hope reached faintly towards me with a hand of light. And having so narrowed my scope to the thing as it was, I saw that Ellinor and I were divided, in this life, by the deed I had done. Determination being thus strengthened in myself, I recalled the counsel of Mary, and went down, as was now

frequently my practice, to the village to discover if any more miserable than myself had occasion for my service.

To that end, my natural destination was the Oak Tree Inn, a sordid place where the ill fellows of the neighbourhood foregathered. As I came near I saw Tommy Short sauntering towards it with a careless "hallelujah" on his lips, and the thirsty pre-occupation of his mind evident in his eye. Seeing me, he started and fell upon self-accusing excuse.

"Master Whapshare," said he, "I be but tuning up for to-morrow's service. I'm not to wrop away and hide the talent of song that's upon me; and these are seemly words for all occasions."

"Tune up, Tommy," said I, "so that you do so soberly."

"Oh, sobriety!" said he. "Far be it from me to gallop sacred words with the bubbling of drink within. Sobriety's the setting o' hymn-singing, sir."

Here his eye, darting side-ways, descried

that I had led him past the "Oak Tree" door. He motioned to it with his thumb, and gravely shook his head.

"There be drunkards within," said he, "and songs that are light."

"Tommy," said I, "I have a small matter of potato ground at the cottage that will do with a bit of hoeing and weeding."

"Taters, sir? H'm!"

"Now, could you go straight on there and do an hour or two's work for me? You 've a talent for gardening, Tommy, as well as for singing, you know."

He spread his hands.

"It is a rare gift," said he, "and one well descended from our first parents. Taters, you said?"

"Yes, Tommy. And you could stay and get a bit of supper in the kitchen."

"Oh, Master Whapshare, the labour 's a reward in itself! Taters, you said?"

"Potatoes, Tommy. And just call in first and ask Mrs. Mary Maver for a drink

of her buttermilk. She's been butter-making."

"Buttermilk?" said he.

"Yes, Tommy. It'll clear your throat; and you can give Mary a song over the hoeing."

"I be off, Master Whapshare. They taters'll grow the better for my handling; and I'll pay respects to Mistress Maver. Buttermilk, you said? *Buttermilk!* Ah—h!"

With this simulated ecstasy, and being now for the time beyond the region of temptation, he stepped out like a man.

I returned to the inn, and opening the door of the tap-room, stood a moment, with my hands on either side the frame, looking round. Three or four men sat about the table with their mugs and pipes. None, so far, were intoxicated; and, at my coming, there was a shuffling of feet upon the floor, and someone pushed back a bench to make room for me. The fellow nearest the door nudged a neighbour.

“Here be Master Whapshare,” said he.

“And welcome,” said the other.


So I came and sat amongst them. And as I chatted on the news of the day—for this, I knew, was their expectation from me—painting to their dull eyes what little I could of that greater world to which they never came, I noted, in the corner near the fireplace, an ill-looking and shabbily-dressed fellow sitting, with his chin depressed upon his breast. His clothes were of a good cut, though worn and greasy, and through the degradation of as brutalised a countenance as I had seen lingered some marks of breeding. As I began my discourse, he raised his head, and turned on me a bold pair of blood-shot, jeering eyes, holding them on me in a manner intended to insult, and lifting his lip in a sneer that showed like the snarl of a dog. This man I attentively regarded, and, as I thus watched him, it hazily passed through my mind that such an evil eye as his I had encountered before. This impression deepened, and throughout my talk I cast

about as to who could be the man whose face was so writ without a name upon my memory. Meanwhile, he interrupted the talk by mimicry and ribald jokes, and such coarse offences designed towards firing the anger of a man. A part of the company thinking, it may be, that distinction rests with insolence (as I have observed to be the error of better men than these), gradually took up the manners of the stranger in the corner, while the rest, being desirous to hear the end of the matter I was on, fell into a violent altercation with their fellows.

'T was a piece of devilry skilfully worked : a coarse rendering of what I have seen brought about by clever malice in better company than this. I watched for a while the black storm gathering over the spirits about me, and the wretch in the corner, grinning with evil joy at what he had provoked ; then I rose up, and with a commanding voice begged for silence. I think it was a sudden apprehension of my height and breadth that stopped

the tongue of the stranger in the corner. And I took the occasion to say it was but fair that the two who had created a disturbance between men otherwise assembled in good-fellowship should withdraw together, and talk over differences outside. Then I looked to my man. And he, having measured my size doubtfully with his shifty eyes, took up his hat and slunk off, amidst the derision of the company, I following, and marshalling him out. Being outside he hesitated, and glanced doubtfully at me. I raised my hat and motioned him to proceed. He loosened an insult from his tongue, and passed up the road before me. My way led in the same direction, and as I went on after him I perceived a change in his gait ; he went now hurriedly, casting suspicious glances to right and left. And presently in a lonely part of the road, from a hiding-place in an old barn, I beheld a tattered, broken creature issue, who followed with creeping, cautious steps.

I was but a yard or two behind, and could



see with what sullen concentration he fixed his eyes on him who went before. And in an instant I knew who he was. The face, marred by disease, vice, and privation, was of a sickly whiteness, yet I recognised it, and stepped after him quickly, and, coming up alongside, was ready to cry out his name.

“Pete! Pete!” I would have said; “come home and rest at the house of a man of Devon like yourself!”

But at my hurrying tread, Peter Labrum turned upon me without recognition, and with an aspect scarcely human; so that my impulse fell dead within me, and I stood where I was. For as I had seen the snarl of a dog on the face of the one man, so did I see upon the other the dangerous threatening look of an animal interrupted of his prey. Having cast such a glance my way, the broken creature shambled on, and I saw the two shadows of men pass on the road before me, the one flitting along on the heel of the other. But as I watched, my eyes more taken with Peter La-

brum than with the first, I saw him suddenly throw up his hand and shout, and go forward at a feeble run. The cause lay evident before me; the stranger from the inn had hailed a passing spring-cart, and got in, and was being carried swiftly away. The cart vanished over the hill, and so presently did Peter also, running feebly, his rags fluttering about him, his hand thrown up as a signal, and his hoarse and ineffectual shouts blown back from the cart to me.





CHAPTER XVI.

ONE quality of my changed experience, while I felt it acutely, I accepted without question or revolt. This was my sense of isolation from my fellows. By my action I had torn myself out of that genial social fabric which is wrought in common forbearance of the common imperfection. Acts such as mine lay outside of this human toleration.

The assent of my will and conscience to the rough and necessary judgment of mankind was not accompanied by repentance towards Heaven. While my monstrous crime humbled me, in my own eyes, below the meanest of my fellows, it produced no like attitude towards God.

Before the dark mysterious Power to Whom

I owed my creation, and Who had woven my anguish into His scheme of the universe, I stood unbent, and lifted my brow with counter accusation, crying in the secret places of my heart :

“ *You* I do not pardon.”

Then, avoiding the reputable and respected, I turned to the outcasts and refuse to which I belonged, having the common honesty to take my own place in life, and not to enforce upon honourable men a companionship they would have rejected.

Amongst the frequenters of the Oak Tree Inn, in Tommy Short and the companions of his worst moments, I now habitually sought my fellows, and the basis of my friendliness having in it what was genuine, I found myself accepted. I earnestly endeavoured to give here of the best that remained to me, and was so far successful that I thought I learned this lesson out of life, to carry the best of which one is capable to the sinner and not to the saint, if a man will have it understood.

At the Oak Tree Inn were many pages of dark reading ; and these I suffered myself to mark without rejecting. I had no self-righteousness that I should start from them ; the shock of my life had arisen in myself, and there was none so low but I might take my hat off to him. That dream of the reformer, with which I had begun life, was, as I say, dead. Not to reform masses, but to understand individuals, was now my task. And by and bye I thought I began to read this great fact of evil with more comprehending eyes ; and even in the dark places to come on luminous spots.

Tommy Short, for example, when held to sobriety by firm treatment, had parts of his own, nor was my attendance on this oscillating spirit without its reward ; for, once or twice, the protesting, shamed eyes of his wife darted my way a look so amazed and radiant that a beam of unsought consolation fell upon my spirit. And though my sense of unworthiness before my fellows was deeply and utterly real, I found in my ministrations to the children on

one hand, and in this contact with the roughs of the place on the other, something tonic and healing.

But within my own home, cut off alike from accustomed pain and accustomed consolation, I trembled at the little common joys that remained, seeing myself but as one who steals near the great feast of life to thrust a thieving, uninvited hand to the smaller dishes here and there.

At times I detected in Mary a desire to push near me life's richer fruits, but if I felt the name of Ellinor Blakemore so much as glancing between our minds, I assumed a black demeanour; and with that the selfless creature fell to her prayers, shedding priceless benedictions on the head that could not take them.

"The Lord ha' mercy! The good Lord ha' mercy!" she would say.

Yet all my days fled on, winged by the fear that the secret sympathies which are in things must bring about the meeting with the beloved

woman, and that it was written between us as a thing inevitable. Then April had hardly dawned before it befell.

It was a Saturday afternoon, a time apt to be fatal to Tommy, and I had engaged him on a wager to out-walk me a certain distance—for the man's vanity made him leap at a bet as a fish to a bait—and, having won with as much discretion as would "allay with some cool drops" and yet not dash the elevation of his spirit, I made my accustomed suggestion of healthy occupation under the eye of Mary Maver. There was wood to cut, water to carry, the yard to sweep, and a trifle or two of rough work laid up for Tommy, being, indeed, a weekly engagement designed to carry him over the special hour of his temptation. But Tommy could not be brought to accept it in this light; he must receive a special invitation for his services, and would colour his acceptance by many fine presentiments thrown from as high-stepping a fancy as I have met.

"These are toys to a craftsman, master," he

would say ; "but I misdoubt the spoiling of my hand for higher labour."

"Not a bit of it, Tommy ! It will keep your hand in."

"Be I to stand before the world as a Jack-o'-all-trades, master ? Good money was paid down for me when I learned my trade."

And he would turn his tremulous hand admiringly before his eyes.

"I admit the trade, Tommy ; but why rust in other directions ?"

"That 's true, master. I be powerfully gifted in one way or another. There 's talent in this corner."

And he would rap his brow with his craftsman's hand, shake his head thoughtfully, and then, with a touch to his forelock, shamle away. That Saturday I walked on into the woods, my mind occupied with the man and his humours, so that for the first time for many months my constant dread lay neglected. And so, pushing my way through the thick underwood and bracken in which I loved

to walk, I came out to a more open place, and suddenly saw her—the beloved woman—standing before me. I looked at her for a moment objectively, taking her as a picture, and satisfying my eye with what was lovely and gracious in it. Her cheek, I thought, was rounder than it had been, and with more colour, the possibility of happiness seemed ready to bloom out of the delicate face; and if for the moment it was shadowed by a little apprehension, I traced that to the mournful remembrance which lay between us. The golden instant of meeting carried me beyond myself—as though my identity were absorbed in a better presence than my own—so that my eyes dwelt on hers. And then I saw, swimming over her face, the irresistible joy and half-formed expectation of her heart.

It was the sight of that innocent and lovely hope which brought me back to my isolation, and taught me how ruthless murder is. The man changed by crime stands as a stranger before joy while life endures, and on the edge

of this holy place of happiness I checked my contaminating steps, and stood stricken where I was, making a hurried gesture of the hand. This, I think, she did not notice, for her tread forwards was in a beautiful composure, the blush on her cheek just speaking of the tender agitation in her heart.

"You will speak to me?" said she, in timidity.

"Ah, yes," said I, my looks dropping to the ground. "Ellinor—*my wife is dead!*"

"By her own hand," she answered. "Yes, I saw it."

I was silent, and laid my finger on my lips.

"She was a better woman than I thought," said Ellinor, in a small, sobbing voice.

"Her end," I said, "was not without nobility."

"But, believe me—I never intended—never dreamed— They were just passionate words, symbols of certain feelings in my own heart—feelings that I cannot think were wrong—"

She broke off, and I, in amazement, looked full on her. And then the meaning of the faint apprehension I had seen in her face, the timidity of her voice, were revealed to me. I had this bitter thing to confront, this austere lesson to learn: our acts draw after them not only other and larger consequence than we conceived, but, in related though higher minds, they may start counter disturbances which could not be foreseen, and can hardly, in their remoteness, be named effects.

"The letter she left was printed in the paper. I read my own words in it," she pursued. "Those were my words. I cannot deny it."

Before what a tribunal did the creature of swift right instincts and delicate strong conscience arraign herself! The meaning of crime could hardly touch her. It was a reflex perturbation from my own mind she showed me. And I remained heavily silent, my guilt turning in my heart to look at me with new worse eyes.

"It was a great perplexity to come into my life," said she, with a short, sobbing sigh. "I have sought, and I have recalled my thoughts. Heaven knows I meant no short shrift for the poor blind soul, but chose strong words to stimulate and awaken." She paused, then took a humbler, sweeter tone—ah, me! how bitter-sweet! "You remain silent. Perhaps you shrink from me?"

"Oh, Ellinor!" I began, in horror and distress, "the beautiful part and that alone is yours!"

She looked at me, not comprehending.

"I have sometimes been heavy and sorrowful lately, passing along dark ways," said she, and she opened her hands, one on each side her body, with a plaintive, puzzled gesture.

And then I knew how close human spirits can be, and that not in speech or physical proximity only is communion. The shadow of my guilt she had not escaped, though I had been earnest to defend her. I turned sharply away, and leaned my arm on a tree, and my

head against it ; and in my silence I prayed to the Power I had defied to save me now, to lend me a little light that I might deal this bright and beautiful creature the least possible hurt from my fatal hands. And, as with one portion of my mind I prayed, with another I rapidly considered. Then, as men have drawn swords against their wives to preserve them by death from outrage, so I took the two-edged sword of my tongue wherewith to sever the bonds that were between us. I came forward again.


“ You mistake, Ellinor,” said I. “ You may entirely be quit of this shadow in your mind. This death did not originate with your words. It was clothed at the last with the beauty of your words and your manner—that was all. But the cause of it was sudden, and is known to me and to me only.”

She heard me in joyful surprise, and then thanked me with soft, rapid words, which showed the instant freeing of her mind from the unreal shadow, and from the foreboding of

division between us. Her speech flowed now with an easy melody to which I could attach no special word or phrase, but which besieged my ears and my heart—mine who stood ready with my sword which was my mercy—with its bright spontaneity, and the tender poetry of gentle sound, until she brought it to a pause on the lingering and sweet utterance of my name.

“Stephen,” she said.

I could not choose but lift my unwilling lids, and I saw her standing in the radiant strength of her womanhood, a creature such as I used to be, yet beautifully diverse. Behind her head was a branch of budding palm, and she had her hands very slightly open towards me, the soft, pink fingers ready. Her face was suffused with dawning happiness; her gentle air and her deep eyes invited me. But at the sound of my own name I, the shadow of it, stepped back and looked to the earth, ready for that new murder which was child to my first.



She, too, stepped back a little. I noted it, because the space of earth between our feet was greater ; my eyes dwelt on the ground, my lids but flickering up momentarily, so that I saw the grass about her skirt, and the leaves, and the March wind-flowers and pale prim-roses lying against the hem of her china-blue gown ; between her feet and mine I saw the sprinkling of star-like, delicate flowers I dared not over-pass. The wind was in the pines above, and a wood-pigeon cooed there. A sunbeam lay across the skirt of her dress and shone my way, and there was a joyous dance of insects in the air, and cool, wholesome scents.

And my powers of vision seemed to go beyond and out of my body, so that I beheld myself also, as a man of thirty-five years, of goodly proportions, with a dark beard, and plentiful blanched hair, standing opposite, my head bent downwards by habit, my sad eyes heavily fixed on the ground, and unnaturally refusing the invitation of the glowing, life-filled creature near me. Seeing these things,

the opposition between the apparent and the real struck on me in so clear and absolute a fashion that I began to speak of it, fast and deep, in a stream of hurrying words, as a mad-man might do.

“Do you not see, Ellinor,” I cried, “how like two creatures of the earth we seem, standing here in the wood together, with one sun-beam covering and warming our bodies, and the little flowers of the earth linking us together with the innocent garland they lay about our feet? And we are both young, and the days of our life are many before us. In your face I see the desire to embrace me, and your hands invite me, and we are alone. Therefore it would seem that we are together on this bright and genial earth—a young man and a maiden. But that, Ellinor, is but beautiful seeming. It is like one of those exquisite dreams of the night which suddenly unites us to the desires of our hearts, giving us, in a moment, all we have craved of happiness, nearness, and love. From which great glad-

ness we awake to the accustomed sorrow of the day. Our meeting here is like that, and it is nothing more. You and I are not *really* here together. You do not stretch your arms to a man, but to a phantom. Do you not see that we human beings are condemned to *seem* of the earth, but to *be* of some other plane? Upon that other plane we, you and I, are not close together, but far—far—apart."

She interrupted me, feeling her way after my wild, incomprehensible words with her woman's anxious question :

"Does she—Ida—come between us after all?"

I shook my head and hurried on.

"Nothing of earth is between us," said I ; "that which separates us is not so slight, nor waits on any happy accident. I have not that joy even to know where you are. Where you are I cannot tell for certain."

I paused, and then I made ready with my sword—compelled to that murder which must be added to the first.

"I seem to see you," I continued slowly and firmly, "striving along a thorny path alone, and far away; only over your head are stars. You carry in your heart, along that path, the woman's burden of unfulfilled love, and day by day the grief of missing the beloved is not lessened. I see you there; you are alone; and all the seeming phantoms near you cannot fill the gap. And I? You see the little space where the flowers which are your thoughts grow between us? But you do not apprehend the treacherous and dark abyss which lies there, too. Yet there it is, and in it I have fallen, Ellinor—fallen for a thousand years, maybe, of our mortal time. It is a place of black clouds and rocks, and the noise of turbulent seas. And between me and your saving hand above, hangs midway, as a curtain, the anger of God. I lie at the bottom, a thing broken beyond your healing. *That*, Ellinor, is the reality. Here is but the dream, and the phantom, and the beautiful seeming of earth. A thousand years of space between us, Ellinor,

and you in your plane so separated from me, and mourning all your days the missing of the beloved."

Having so spoken, and so made an end of the passion and dismay in my heart, I raised my eyes to find if my deed was complete, and I saw that she had shrunk further back, until the budding palm laid its soft, yellow tassels about her hair; under the innocent coronal her cheek was white, and her lips parted a little, and the eyes that looked on me were wide and startled.

And yet how beautiful was the wood, and the woman, and the earth! How mournful the impossibility of the dream! How fair, but how remote, the blessing of human love!

I, the condemned man, saw it as it was, and felt the grace and tenderness of that which I had slain softening and touching my heart. I covered my face with my hands, and it seemed that my very soul sighed within me. When I looked again, she had shrunk close to the tree behind her, the fingers that

were mine grasping and bruising themselves on the bark.

"I saw the kiss on your lips," said I, "and I thank you for it. But for all your grace and tenderness I have nothing to give back, save—*this*."

And then I, the broken image of a man, turned and walked away.

I walked on and on, and the sweat poured from my brow. Once—only once—I looked back, and I think she must have stood motionless, for I caught the tint of china blue still amongst the trees.





CHAPTER XVII.

IN my interview with Ellinor I touched the bottom of my despair.

The great dread and single peril which I counted as remaining to me in life was overpast, and I even carried out of it a faint changeling joy, as having, at least, comported myself in a manner consistent with fact. And that, I remembered, is the fruit-bearing way of behaviour.

As though it were possible that in the tangle to which I had come I had fingered a clue; as though it might be that my foot turned, and the re-ascent from the terrible abyss had begun; that I crept slowly upward with many a pause, it may be, and with looks too often bent to the ground, and yet moving

on with my face to the home of my soul, and on the long path towards her who was the heart of it !

I remained where I was in my cottage, dealing with the humble matters of the school (grown great to me), and with the lower aspects of village life, austere moving within the circuit of my duties as they naturally fell, and cutting my ambition (if any remained) to the measure of the day. And thus I continued on the daily round, and yet vigilant for small opportunity, for as many months as would make a year or two of time.

Then ~~one~~ day I looked up ; and around me on the way of my life I discerned a faint irradiation, as though, beyond those mists that encompassed me about, light were shining.

It was early autumn, a still day, rich in colour and scents, and with a sharpness in the air through the sunshine. And the school hours being over, I went out above the links to taste the solitude—to me an ever new and healthful joy—and rest my eyes on the spread

of the landscape. And standing thus on the hill, my mind moved back on the long journey, and in the deep places of the soul—where thoughts that belong to the action of the life lie hidden from the beginning, to come forth at last with illumined revelation—that hour of my past returned to me—that hour when, in Trafalgar Square, amidst the pomp of a great city, I vowed my untried life in service to the most broken of its children. And I saw, in a vision, the young desire and aspiration of my heart, as a white-robed anchorite, passing into the holy place, the offering of my prayer as incense in his hands. And having so entered, the curtain had fallen behind him, and each of the shrouding years between had dropped its blacker fold until the memory even of hope was lost. And the anchorite and the prayer he bore, and the place whither he had gone, had dwindled and retreated from my mind.

But now, in this dream of the day, I saw that place wonderfully neared to me again ; and as I became aware of it before me, the

curtain which had fallen lifted, and from that inward portion of the heart, which, in its smallness and remoteness, is the gate to a great mystery, stepped forth he who had gone in before, wearing on his brow the peace of one who has offered the petition, and made the sacrifice, and received the answer. And with him he brought back the prayer, returning it into my mind, so that I beheld it again—the uttermost petition, the very inward truth of it—answered and fulfilled.

“Becoming the servant and helper of these despoiled children of earth and forsaking place and office, be in thyself Christ’s disciple to them.”

The vision, strange, momentary, and inward, was gone directly, but not the force of it. Yet scarcely dared I credit it or the joy or the folding over me of the sense of unity in my life. Could I believe that the path by which I had come was *His* path, who is the Way? and could I, looking upon the horror of my experience—in a faith illumined and im-

measurably widened beyond the lost faith of my childhood—find even *that* also lying within the broad net of His providence which misses nothing?

It might be so. It might be there is no division, no demarcation of one kind of experience from another, no dual kingdom. So it might be.

And in this mood, my heart quietening down to the peace of it, listening to and feeling after a scarce-credited message, I walked on towards a bye-lane leading from the Oak Tree Inn to a lonely portion of the high-road. Into this lane I was about to turn, meaning to go down to the inn, when I saw a distressed and broken figure in fluttering rags approaching me up it. As I had not opened the gate from the links into the lane, he did not see me, and I stood where I was and watched him pushing painfully up the incline, his one hand thrust in the bosom of his wretched coat, the other moving in spasmodic gestures, as though in an accompaniment to thought. And I recognised in

him the figure of Pete Labrum, strangely flitting once more across my path.

Just such an one as this was I now made ready to understand, and having in my mind a recollection of how last time I lost him, I determined to proceed with the more caution ; therefore I left the gate without entering the lane, and turned back to run across country to that end of it which opened on to the high-road. The lane passed at the last along the edge of a small spinney having a gate into the road. The road lay for a mile or two over a space of moorland, edged now by woods, and now by the low growth of heather, furze, and other small bushes. Opposite the spinney was a small, but deep, moor pond. I came by way of the moor close up to the gate, and seated myself on the high bank near, under a convenient covert of furze ; and by this time dusk was falling. I had not to wait long before I heard Pete's laboured step and breathing coming along the lane through the spinney, and then, as he muddled with the latch of the gate, I

heard his low curses. I leaned forward cautiously, and I could see he worked with one thin tremulous hand, bending his haggard face to try and discover the method of fastening. Then he drew the other from the bosom of his coat, where it was still thrust, and I saw in that hand, as he laid it under the rail of the gate to raise it a little, the cold flash of steel. With that, I withdrew more under cover, and waited for I knew not what.

Pete came through the gate and stood in the road, his hand once more in the bosom of his coat, his face turned in the direction of the village, and took a step or two along the road that way, and so brought himself immediately below where I lay. This spot he reconnoitred. The road from the village caught as much light as there was until it reached the spinney; this overshadowed it, and the gate into the lane was close on the village side of the wood. My position, chosen by myself at hap-hazard, suited the purpose of Pete; and he slid down into the hollow immediately below me, and

rolled behind a furze bush. There he lay still as a log, his hand now openly grasping his knife, his head raised, and eyes and ears on the alert. And as still as he lay so did I sit, waiting and watching.

Once I heard him give a low, repressed groan, and then rising from the hollow under my feet, I heard the strange and thrilling whisper of a prayer.

"Oh, Gawd," it went, and he spoke with concentrated earnestness of entreaty, "send that he come this way! By the road or the lane. Send that he come. That I may stick 'im. For Christ's sake. Amen."

Pete had learned that ending to prayer in the old home in Devon, and his lips pattered it over now, I thought, unconsciously. And I began to understand what was the tragical business before us.

The dusk gathered and gathered until night almost fell. And then at last along the highway from the village came a step, hard to be detected even in the silence of that still night,

but carried by the clearness of the air ; he who came trod, I noticed, as much as possible on the sward, running when he could do so easily, the very sound of his foot having, as it seemed to me, stealth and fear within it. As that step neared, the grasses and ferns about Pete trembled with the frightful eagerness the man was under ; and he cautiously changed his posture, drawing his legs up for a spring. And on my side I too made ready. The steps of the victim were now close at hand, and as he neared the spinney and the black shade of it, he trod out into the centre of the road, and threw off the assumed courage of a careless song—given, as I judged, in a false voice. However that may be, Pete was not deceived by it ; in his corner was a dreadful tenseness and silence ; then, as the man came opposite, he was up from his lair and over the bush in an instant of time, and upon his enemy and his hand raised to strike. But swift though he had been, I had been ready, and before he could use it, had seized

his wrist, and snatched the knife, and hurled it into the moor pond the other side of the road. The stranger, at this breaking upon him of sudden hubbub and murder from the stillness of the night, uttered a horrible scream, and now, being freed from the grasp of Pete, dashed away in panic-stricken flight, past the wood, and so on the high-road in the London direction. Through the wrestling of Pete and myself, the gasps and blows, we could hear the steps beating down the road, and on and on with ever fainter echoes; and then when we could distinguish them no more, Pete threw up his arms, and seeming to double up under my hands, fell in a heap on the ground; I raised his head and dragged him a little distance, and laid him softly on the sward, and here I heard him burst into a series of helpless sobs and wild ejaculations.

I seated myself by his side, and loosened my hold, having no fear now that he would escape me. The words that babbled from his mouth were but the black froth from as

seething and frenzied an emotion as ever tossed its tumult within a single piece of agonised life; and presently the incoherence of his cries shaped themselves enough to my understanding for me to be able to find that he bewailed the loss of his knife and his opportunity with a grief which could not be surpassed. The tragic passion of the man set the uncouth, illiterate phrase in sombre grandeur, and threw him—his rags, insignificance, and shivering helplessness—on a plane beyond himself.

The night had now so far fallen that neither of us could see the face of the other; but I knew, by the sounds, that he had turned over on the sward, and that his fingers were clutching about him to feel after the blade he had lost.

"My knife!" he cried. "What's got my knife?"

"It's safe at the bottom of the moor pool, my man," said I, in the coolest of my tones.

"Give it me back," he gasped, his lips and gnashing teeth amongst the grasses. "Give

it me back ! I all but 'ad 'im, and now he 's off and safe. But let me get 'im again. Let me 'ang so 's I get 'im. Gawd in 'eaven, let me tear 'is 'eart out. Lemme, I say ! Oh, Gawd, Gawd, Gawd, why have 'ee a-sent this 'ere damned moke to steal my knife ? Give it me back again ; lemme kill 'im, and I 'll die fair, and take in 'ell and all."

It was thus the marred and broken creature apostrophised his Creator, sending his soul's message up through the night, and appealing, in his anguish, with a child's directness and simplicity, to the One who made him, and I thought that prayers of such passionate sincerity, such even and unabashed truth, rarely fled up through the night of earth to the Ear that listens to the cries. And instantly, in my own heart, I thought I heard the answer to that prayer, and that it was laid on me to carry it. I leaned nearer to him to make my whisper. The moor flowed around us as a black robe, and night covered us up, and buried our words.

"You ask why I was sent. It was," said I, "to prevent your taking God's justice into your own hands, and marring it."

"Look 'ere, mate," cried he, writhing and stretching about his arms, as I could dimly see, in a strange parody of longing and supplication. "Look 'ere! If I done it, it 's enough justice, meat and drink, and 'eaven, for me. But you 've bin, and gone, and stole my knife, and the blasted rascal 's got off safe. 'Tain't straight justice. Goo' Lor'! it 's damned hard on me."

And he sobbed again.

I laid my hand on his shoulder.

"Look' ere!" he gasped. "You 're the p'lice, I reckon. Take me up, and git done with it. He 's escaped me now for good, and I 'm tired o' life."

I told him I was not the police.

"What d' yer come for, then," cried he passionately, "marring and spoiling my game?"

I said that I was just a mate of his, as he

had called me, and could understand his game if he would tell it me, and that I had not spoiled it ; and, at these cool words, he became suddenly still.

“ You may trust me,” I went on.

The man rolled over with chattering teeth, and sat up. I knew that he mopped the sweat which trickled from his face, and I thought that the words I had uttered were beginning to lay hold of his mind.

“ What did you throw away the knife for ? ” said he sullenly. “ You might ha’ ’elped me right.”

He began again to shudder and tremble under the passion which had him in its grip, and then I reminded him of what he had forgotten, which was, that an hour ago, when he lay in the hollow, he had uttered a prayer. Whereupon, with many an unnecessary oath, he asserted that he could not pray, and vehemently declared that he had no desire so to do.

“ You ’re one o’ them milk-and-water chaps come to offer me salvation,” said he. “ I don’t

want your 'salvation.' What 's salvation to a man who has n't got fair justice? Give me my knife back and 'im coming up the road is what I ask. There ain't no prayer left in me. Me pray! Oh, Lord!" and he laughed. And his laughter sprang from the grim sincerity of his mood, for he could conceive of no praying that was genuine, that was not something of a pose—something unreal beside will and feeling strong as his. He knew what passionate and overwhelming desire was, and the thought of it drank up those feeble parodies of wishes which he hitherto had named prayers.

"Yet you *did* pray," I repeated. "You prayed in the hollow an hour since," and then I told him what the prayer had been. He shifted about uneasily.

"*That* ain't praying," said he.

"Yes," said I, "it was real praying. And, because it was sincere, it was heard, and understood, and answered."

"Wot's He a-goin' to do, then?" said he, in an awed, eager, but doubting whisper.

"Keep His own justice safe from your marring hand, Peter Labrum," said I.

"That ain't my name!"

"Peter Labrum of Devon," I repeated firmly.

I felt him lift up a startled face and peer into the darkness. And I heard him utter incoherent exclamations that strangely hovered between prayers and curses, for the mention of Devon moved him. And then I came a degree closer to the man, and, putting into my tones as much of the Devon vernacular as I could command, drew from him his unhappy story, and long and earnestly communed with him through the night.

It was a tale of wrong subtly worked against him by the villain who had been his master, until Pete, caught in toils from which he could not escape, had suffered imprisonment for a crime which was that rascal's who betrayed him. Out of the prison walls Pete had stepped a changed man—a man with a definite end before him—a man who, instead of slipping idly


down any road to that annihilation which is the last destruction, had now an aim to which he clung with single and uttermost resolve. For the wrong done him had created within him a tragical and haunting passion of vengeance which had knit up his character with its rough force and energy. So that he had applied himself for years of his life to the pursuit of the betrayer in the settled and desperate will to destroy him ; and before this monstrous hate of his own creation, the wretch, in panic and horror, fled, and was still fleeing. And, before morning dawned, I had so far prevailed with him as to persuade him he might win back some true life for himself by means of the will shaped from his passion of hate.

For who, thought I, as I heard the story and made answer to the sufferer who revealed it, shall decide that in this scheme of the building of the life of man those strong forces, ignorantly by us named evil, play not a part with those other forces as ignorantly named good, in freeing from this strange and mingled piece

of humanity, the upward-striving and imprisoned God?

When morning was come I took Peter to my cottage, and fed and refreshed him, nor let him out of my hands until I had seen him safe on his way back to Devon, where he pulled through the few remaining years of his troubled life in something of peace, succoured by relatives, and earning for himself at his old trade as a fisher.

With the last meeting with, and parting from Pete, I come to the end of the story of my crime. I had been a man marked out amongst other men to bear the horror of a great darkness upon me. Yet can I not say that in that great darkness, nor within my own act, the Hand of the Best in all the universe was absent. Goodness had not saved me, I perceived, nor crime damned me; but—I thought that so I understood it—an admixture of the two had brought me to a condition serviceable to God's exact uses for me, and had even made possible the fulfilment of my own rash prayer—who had



asked so much without right understanding. And now, in the contemplation of my experience, I found myself unable to discern any line separating the kingdom of light from that of darkness, nor was I able to except God from any part of His creation. And the light that thus came to me out of absolute darkness I called the reconciler, because it reconciled me to myself, and to my fellowmen, and to Him in whose image I was made.

From childhood I had heard that One, calling Himself the Son of God, came to earth, and bore and expiated in His own person the sins of the whole world. But none ever told me that He bore and expiated His own. I now took to myself that sweet heresy to believe that He did.

For think what lies in the balance! To drive this complex creature into the universe so shaped and so ill-adapted to his surroundings that he *must* sin, and yet be tortured with the consciousness of sin, be incapable of perfection, but sharply capable of remorse, fore-

ordained to error, and yet carrying the burden of responsibility !

I have had, in my own self-horror, moments when the eyes of my mind beheld the spirit of man blown through the darkness by some fierce breath from the Creator's lips, and lighting, as by chance, on this shred of rock that we name earth amid the boundless space ; a thing bound to errors, and misconceptions, and furious passions, but working his way up to blinding deeds of sweetness and love towards his fellowmen, and the expiation of crimes that were not his. And I have thought that I saw the Eternal eyes searching through the darkness after the breath of His life which had gone forth, and seeing this image of His own which He had made.

For it may be He—the Christ—was God. And it may be He, to whom Time is not, and whose Omniscience carries no burden of the sequence in things, returned in very fact to seek after the image of Himself that He had made, and out of love and pity for His creature

robed Himself again in the flesh and limitations that creature carried for Him ; and then by the terrifying agony of remorse in the Garden expiated the act of creation, and bore His own burden of the sins of the whole world on the Cross, and by that great passion and tragedy of reparation, opened the way of reconciliation to His helpless children. It *may* be so. Were it not so, then is the creature who repents with sorrow and great anguish of that in which he had no choice, and who sets himself to save himself and fellowman, better and higher than his Creator.

I opened my spirit to this reconciling heresy. And thus it was that I became able to forgive Him. And that afterwards I meekly asked Him to forgive me also.

Thus along dark ways into peace, so that I continued the work given me to do in quiet of mind, staying in the village to which I had come, and accepting the simple, tranquil joys that increased around me, and the friendship and companionship of Mary.

And one day when I was a man over forty-five, a letter reached me. The very superscription of it made my pulses clash with joy as bells might do. For this was, I knew, a message from the well-loved woman. And I opened and read :

“TO THE BELOVED: For many years I have gone along the path you told me of, and yet I am not lonely. By degrees, my beloved, I learned from the secret teachings of my heart, and from my deep forebodings before it happened, what had happened.

“I was neither horrified nor yet astonished, because it was the thing whose shadow I saw on your brow, and from which I would have saved you, though I saw as one without knowledge. And the escape I would have offered you was, it may be, not within the slow and balanced steps of destiny. I have found force to trust that destiny. For when at last I understood your words, your utter, last farewell, I saw that you were right. The path to

our meeting must be long ; but when we bade one another adieu, our feet took the first steps along it.

“ I do not separate myself from you or your deeds. I think of myself as part of you, nor is that path too long which has you at the end.

“ *You* were right. It is but ashes to snatch love out of error. It was not strange to learn from your lips how real, how genuine, the best things have to be before they are worth touching, nor what expiation is needed in the hearts to which they fall at last. It may be even to touch these best of all things is to destroy them, and that to some they do not come earth's way at all. Yet are they there ! Yet shall they come !

“ We might, at that hour of our last encounter, have lost one another for ever ; but you chose the long path of missing the beloved, and did not lie to me ; and all life, henceforth, is finding. To miss the beloved was but the other name for winning the be-

loved. Take courage, oh, my heart, for out of strange contrarities the best and subtlest things are compounded, and she who loves you tells you that so it is. The way is not lonely, my Stephen, for she you banished from you runs always on the path to meet you."

That was the last and only word ; but for this life it sufficed.

THE END.



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